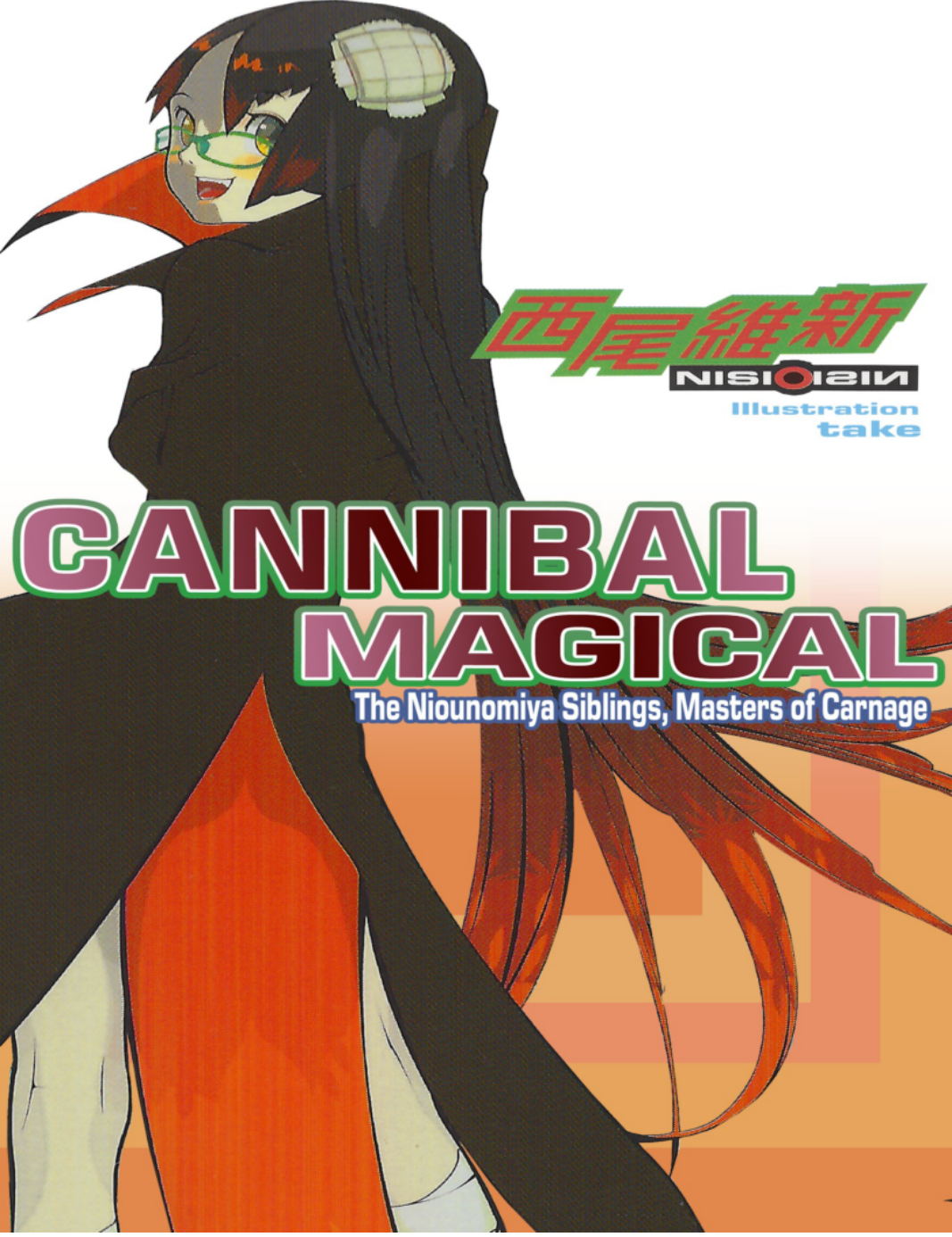
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Illustration
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CANNIBAL
MAGICAL
The Niounomiya Siblings, Masters of Carnage

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Author
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Illustrator
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

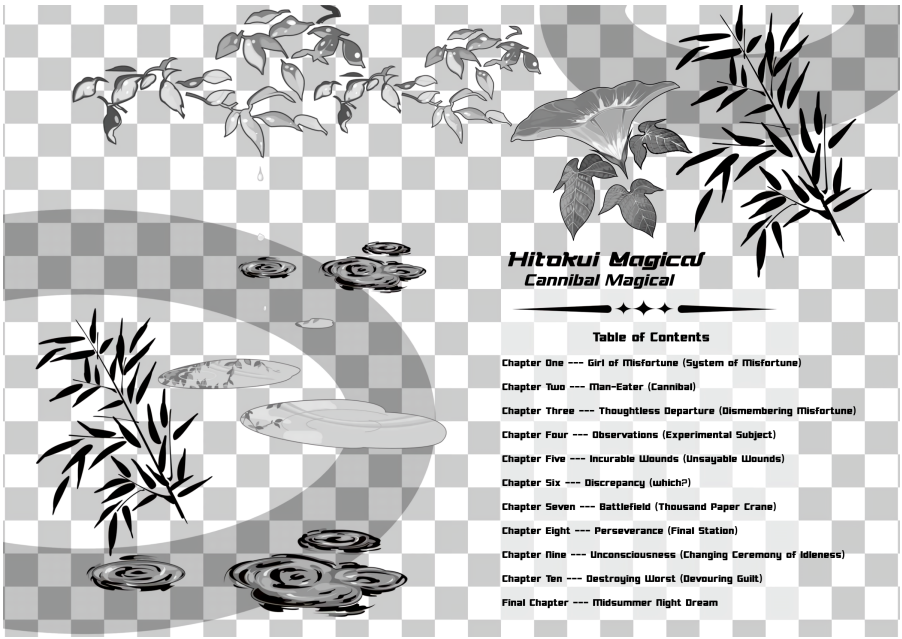
ME (NARRATOR)——PROTAGONIST

KIGAMINE YAKU——ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA——EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT

NIOUNOMIYA IZUMU——PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NIOUNOMIYA RIZUMU——GREAT DETECTIVE

ASANO MIIKO——SWORDSMAN
YUKARIKI ICHIHIME——HIGH SCHOOL GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO——GIRL
ISHINAGI MOETA——GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU——DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI——WITCH
KASUGAI KASUGA——ACADEMIC

AIKAWA JUN——CONTRACTOR
SAITOU TAKASHI——PLAYER
KUNAGISA TOMO——ENGINEER



Hitokui Magical
Cannibal Magical

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ME (NARRATOR)
PROTAGONIST

PEOPLE CAN'T INFLUENCE OTHER PEOPLE,
THEY ALSO CAN'T RECEIVE INFLUENCE FROM OTHER PEOPLE
—DAZAI OSAMU

A pair as one, one as a pair.
A pair is one, one is a pair.
The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.
He and she spend their time in the same body.
They spend it in a closed time.
They spend it in a closed space.
She is Jekyll, and he is Hyde.
A pair as one, one as a pair.
A pair is one, one is a pair.
There is no name for their body.
There are two names for their mind.
Rizumu, the *Carnival*; and Izumu, the *Man Eater*.
Opposite minds in the same body.
Minds of black and white, yin and yang.
On the surface is the flawless detective.
She investigates.
She investigates everything from front to back.
On the opposite side is the heinous professional killer.
He kills.
He massacres people from skin down to bone.
The younger sister who is too distinct to be called a copy.
The older brother who is too distinct to be called a copy.
Two siblings who are far too alike to be called copies.
The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

By the way, have you ever thought of yourself as the protagonist of a story? You don't need to have much conviction about it, but have you ever, at least once thought of yourself as an existence that's just one part of a larger story? Too predestined to be just chance, too inevitable to be just an accident, too karmic to be just a coincidence, too fated to be just an accident; whenever, wherever something abnormal occurred around you, haven't you ever thought, haven't you ever ended up thinking something like that? That there is something like a plot outline **here** and that you and everyone else are just following it, idly and unconsciously, being pulled along the same way

that a magnets draws iron sand to itself, creating a sort of image along the glass; that in a place you don't know, there's a great *someone* that you can't perceive at all who, in a place completely unknown to us, is creating a great *story*. If there's a person who has never, not even once thought of something like that, then they don't deserve to be alive.

Such a person isn't alive.

That's just inertia.

Just continuing.

Each and every person has a predefined role. There's no such thing as a pointless person; everyone is a cog in this world. Even a tragic cog that's just spinning around in place without any meaning, even such hollowness has a great effect on its surroundings. True solitude, which has no effect on the world at all, which has nothing to do with anyone or anything, doesn't exist, not even as a non-existent existence. Even existences that were long ago rejected by reality, those fantastic and illusory existences (whether those were called gods or demons, in this case, the meaning is the same), still continue to disturb their surroundings to this day.

There is destiny.

There is fate.

There is karma.

There is predestination.

Yes, the Story exists.

With an unwavering presence and overwhelming influence.

"If something is absolutely necessary, if it must be done, the intentions of the person who does it are irrelevant. If it's not done today, it will just be done tomorrow; if it's not done tomorrow, then someone else will do it. If something must happen, then even if it doesn't happen, it's the same as if it had happened. Conversely, the unknown possibility where it doesn't happen, a parallel word of 'what ifs' doesn't exist in the slightest, not even as a single hope or despair."

.....

Well, these aren't the words of the user of nonsense.

You can forget them, as if you had been nipped by a fox.

What will begin here is an absurd and ridiculous story.

A story full of deception, which no one would trust if they were told about. A story of desperation, where everyone is deceiving someone, and everything said is a lie. A story through and through, in which all participants lose, each and every one. A story where talking is pointless, where not a single person listens to what the other says, and the moment they start listening their world shuts down. A spine-chilling story filled with blasphemy and gluttony, where there is no friendship or trust. A disordered story which crosses the worst with ugliness and weakness with fragility. A story with mountains of corpses and rivers of blood, covered in blood and death. An ordinary story which missed its chance to deviate from the norm and ends up destined to lose everything as a result. A completely harmonious story devoid of any meaning and intent and significance, overflowing with so much inaction and ignorance and artificiality as to spill out. A decaying story that's decisively colored by cloudiness, mixed with endless chaos. A dull and uninteresting story wholly lacking in emotion and any trace of service. A story with no readers, so opportunistic that it makes you question the author's sanity.

Not one decent person makes an appearance.

Everybody, each and every one, is mad.

Everybody, each and every one, is broken.

Everybody, each and every one, is sick.

Not just the copied siblings.

The girl with the deathless body.

The girl that keeps dying, forever.

The assistant professor who's just a continuation of someone else.

The assistant professor that keeps continuing, forever.

The successor of Zig Zag.

The zigzagging successor.

The biologist who feels nothing.

The biologist who is nothing.

The user of nonsense.

The bystander.

The Blue Savant.

The Blue Verge of Death.
Humanity's strongest contractor.
The Death Colored Crimson.
And the fox-masked man.

There is no introduction to this cannibalized story.
If that is fine with you, let us begin.

CHAPTER 1 — GIRL OF MISFORTUNE (SYMPTOM OF MISFORTUNE)

0

I’ve grown tired of hearing your lies.

1

To be honest, I had prior knowledge about Kigamine, an assistant professor at the Human Biology Department of Takatsu National University. It may not have been enough information to be called prior knowledge, but if I remember correctly, I heard that name around May this year at the Shinkyogoku from the mouth of Aoi Mikoko, a classmate of mine from the same department of Rokumeikan University.

"Umm. Kiga? Kigamine?"

"Wrong! You’re pronouncing it like some starving person! That’s scary!" Mikoko-chan straightmanned me with an exaggerated motion. "No way! Ikkun, you don’t know about that famous professor? It’s like a huge home run that hits the screen in the back, except during the season-opening ceremony!"

"Famous," I said after a moment of pause with a straw clenched between my lips. "Why would I know about a professor at a different school?"

"She comes to our school too! I’m even attending one of her classes! Third period on Mondays! Right after lunch break!"

Mikoko-chan rattled on energetically. "It’s a super popular lecture, so it’s like baaaam and then booooooom, the huge lecture hall is packed together like potatoes being washed! Some people even skip lunch to get seats!"

"Huh. Third period on Mondays, that would be language study for me... Italian. Hmm. So, what’s the name of the class?"

"Hmm?"

"Name of the class."

"Uhhh."

"What’s the class about?"

"Hmm?"

"Class about."

"Uhhh."

"You're just skipping that class!"

"I'm so not! I'm just always sleeping!"

"....."

We were in the McDonald's located near the center of Shinkyogoku Road. We had come here because I'd been dragged along by Mikoko-chan to help her with shopping and I had come to realize that one must not incidentally tag along with a girl's shopping. I had become completely worn out at just around past noon, so we were in the middle of a small break. There were quite a few paper bags next to the table and in them were what I could only presume to be absurdly priced clothing. Mikoko-chan was apparently surprisingly rich. I thought or did not think that it may not be bad to tag along with her, after all.

"But you know, Assistant Professor Kigamine is really, really famous!" Mikoko-chan returned to the original topic so as to avoid having to talk about something inconvenient to herself. "And she's really pretty. Mikoko-tan admires her!"

"Pretty? Oh, it's a she?"

I couldn't tell by the name Kigamine Yaku, and given the way Mikoko-chan described the person, I had figured them to be a man, but one also doesn't usually refer to a man as pretty.

"Yup! She teaches while wearing a lab coat. Lab coat, a lab coat! I usually don't like science teachers because they're hard in the head, but once you get past a certain point, they're kinda cool. Ah, now that I mention it, maybe we can stop by and buy a lab coat since we're out here already. Ikkun, where do you think they sell lab coats?"

"I feel like I've seen some at stores that specialize in uniforms... also I think art schools would sell them in bulk at their stores."

"Art stores? Why?"

"Artists usually wear lab coats when they're working with paint so that it doesn't matter if they get dirty. That or aprons. Even science types normally wear one *so that it's fine to get dirty*, right? These aren't

wedding gowns, after all."

I said as I imagined Mikoko-chan in a lab coat.

.....

Not bad at all.

"Although in that case, you must keep the glasses."

"Huh?" Mikoko-chan tilted her head to the side. Given her expression, it seemed her intent to buy a lab coat was in jest, unfortunately. "Ikkun is so weird. Oh well. You're Ikkun because you're weird. So, as I was saying... are you listening? Hello? Ikkun, what're you thinking about?"

"Hmm? No, I'm listening. I wasn't at all thinking about Tomoe-chan in a lab coat or Muimi-chan in a lab coat or anything. I wasn't at all thinking that Tomoe-chan would look the best in it while Muimi-chan would look absolutely terrible in it."

"Gosh! Ikkun, you're going on about silly stuff again! How vulgar! It's like it's not scary if we cross together, except it's a rope bridge!"

"....."

Ah, it's wonderful to be with a girl who plays the straight-man properly. Kunagisa and Aikawa-san and most of the people I know seem to play the fool and it exhausts me.

"So, what were we talking about?"

"You really weren't listening... shock~," Mikoko-chan doubled over in despair. Five seconds later, she revived. "About yesterday! Mikoko-tan ran into Assistant Professor Kigamine in the university lecture hall!"

Mikoko-san said emphatically, as if announcing a tremendous incident.

The girl really has tough vocal chords.

"A near-miss!"

"You missed?"

"It wasn't a miss though!"

"Hmm... wait, yesterday was Friday, right? Does she have classes other than on Monday? This Assistant Professor Kigamine"

"Dunno. Even if she didn't, she probably was just there for some other reason," Mikoko-san continued, not considering this a big deal.

"And then! Because I wasn't paying attention, wham!"

Wham! Mikoko-chan held out both of her hands.

".....I ran into her."

"So you ran into her."

"Yes. Assistant Professor Kigamine's files and papers and books spilled all over the hallway. Wabam, flutter flutter-."

Mikoko-chan hung her head in shame. Really, she had such exaggerated responses. Although, if one were to say that it's not at all boring to watch her they'd be right.

"Huh... so?"

"And so I apologized and apologized, but Assistant Professor Kigamine smiled serenely and said, 'it's nothing to worry that much over.'"

"Handled like an adult."

"'I had already predicted beforehand that we would collide in this hallway. Our crash here was but guidance from the tip of the greater destiny.'"

"Handled so strangely."

Or rather, run away.

Run away run away run away!

"So I asked. 'What do you mean?'"

"It doesn't seem to me like the time to be asking such questions."

What are you, a hero?

"However, by that point, she wasn't looking at me anymore. She was picking up her files and then she mumbled something like 'in other words, in this world this girl and I only have the relationship *to collide in this hallway*… that is destiny. That is karma. However, a means for avoiding the chosen inevitability must certainly, inevitably exist... no matter how great an existence destiny may be, that is still but a mere landmark... yet more destiny exists outside the scope of destiny... resolutely, and without any sort of opposition effect,' and then as Aoi Mikoko looked on with a flabbergasted look, Assistant Professor Kigamine turned her back to me and left. Chalacha-n, cha, chacha, cha-n. Chalalala-n."

"....."

The peaceful BGM she sounded did not suit the scene.

"So, Ikkun, what'd you think?"

"That person is definitely whack."

One cannot underestimate university faculty.

Well, what can I say, because after all, educational faculty at universities are people who have always devoted themselves to studying..... (distant look).

"Mmm."

For some reason, Mikoko-san had a displeased expression. She puckered her lips, puffed her cheeks, and showed an extremely obvious *displeased* look. It seemed she did not appreciate my thought 'that person is definitely whack.' It looked like Mikoko-chan had been hoping for something more positive and in agreement.

".....Was I supposed to say something like 'sounds like a cool person'?"

"Uhh... gosh! Like firing a hundred rocket-style fireworks in quick succession, except under a clear, blue sky!" Mikoko-chan slapped down on the not-particularly-sturdy-looking table in McDonald's. "Sure, you might think she's just a weird person based on what I said! But she was really cool! The way she moves, or more like the way she acts! In a way that I can't get across in words!"

"Even if you say that....."

"You know, as a girl, she just makes you think she's really, really cool! That's what I wanted to say! I just wish you could get what I meant to say!"

"You don't need to be so insistent....."

I tried to play it cool by sipping at my drink.

"Really, really, certainly, you could tell she's cool! Like, as a girl, the ideal form! It made me want to become someone like her down the line!"

"Cool, huh... well, I know a few cool women as well, but they're all tall without exception. At the very least, 175 centimeters. Mikoko-chan, it's impossible for you."

"H- how cruel!" Mikoko-chan stood up from her chair and made a boxing pose. "It- it's something I fret over! My height, I think about it

a lot, absentmindedly! Ikkun's short too! Not much different from me! Abominable, Ikkun! Brute! Repulsive! Like a million-dollar smile, except it's McDonald's and we're entering summer, except you're a vampire and your face is safe, except you're boxing!"

"Mikoko-chan, you're the best."

Triple combo.

"Ikkun's stupid!"

Mikoko-chan spun around, turning her back to me at one point, and then chopped at me with enough force to crush my windpipe (although she stopped right in front).

Haa.....

But you know.....

"The real deal is different, after all....."

"Did you say something?"

And so.

What pulled me out of my pointless flashback scene and back into reality was a cool, clear voice. I stopped staring meaninglessly at the ceiling and returned my gaze to the source of that voice in front of me.

The location was no longer the Shinkyogoku McDonald's, but instead a certain large domestic hotel located x notches in a different direction, in its first-floor cafe. We sat facing each other at a table for four. One was myself of course, and the other was... well, Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku.

She was of course not in a lab coat, but rather a navy-colored suit properly adhering to social norms. Her fairly long hair was loosely tied together near her nape and she wore frameless glasses. Slightly thick eyebrows and a beauty spot below her right eye. Her front hair was parted toward her right, and even with both of us seated I could

discern her height thanks to how she kept her back straightened. She may not be as tall as Suzunashi-san, but she could probably line shoulders with Aikawa-san. Mikoko-chan's description of her as *cool* fit perfectly.

However.

Even so.

It was a shame.

Even acknowledging her as *beautiful* and *cool*, if I could add but one more word---

"---You look like you're appraising people."

"Eh? Uh, uh huh," I hurriedly responded to Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku. "Ah, if that bothers you, I must apologize. It's like a habit of mine."

"A habit, huh?"

"Unfortunately, I have a terrible memory. I wouldn't consider myself as having an observant eye, but as a result, or perhaps out of necessity, when I meet someone for the first time, I must hammer some characteristics into my head or I forget them entirely."

"I don't mind. I had already predicted that you would be someone whose nature was like that." Assistant Professor Kigamine brushed my apology and excuse aside and then she nodded. "I wouldn't call it so much a habit, but I also have a custom I follow. Should I call it a custom, or something else... anyways, when I meet someone, I cannot help but think about what that person means to me and where that person is positioned within my

flowchart of decision-making. Fufufu... in general though, people do tend to look alike and it's hard to distinguish between them without taking a careful look, right?"

"Uh huh....."

"All of them just imitate others, like they're afraid of being distinguished from others, like they've learned to find comfort in being a follower, in being mass-produced. It's as if they've resigned their unique names, which is just like saying that they've laid themselves at the feet of destiny, or perhaps accepted it… fufufu."

For a moment I thought she was making a joke, but it seemed by the latter half she was just talking to herself. In that case, she wasn't making a joke, but rather those were her *true thoughts*.

"Well then."

Assistant Professor Kigamine returned her gaze to me, as if she were firing lasers through me. Her lips were curled in a smile, but her smile seemed filled more with intimidation and her expression hinted

less friendliness and more wariness.

"While you're currently in the midst of summer break, us professors don't have anything called a break. As such, there doesn't exist such a thing as idle time for this Kigamine Yaku, so allow me to get right to the point."

"Yes."

Incidentally, today was the first of August. As Assistant Professor Kigamine implied, university exams ended yesterday, and so I was beginning my summer break today. However, having summer break equated to *idle time* so simply rubbed me the wrong way. While it was true that I wasn't particularly busy, that did not mean that I was simply lying around being lazy; I had a couple problems of my own. For example, the left arm I injured last month in Aichi (regrettably, it seemed Kokoromi-sensei's treatment went above and beyond satisfactory, so while I would still have scars, I was told it would heal with no lingering effects, but still, it was too early for me to have removed the cast), or having to watch over Hime-chan's studies because she managed to score in the red for every single semester exam she took, or that I felt sluggish and began accompanying Miiko-san on her morning training routines (which are pretty rough), or, well, and so on and so forth. Anyways, I meant to say that I'm not simply lying around. To the point where I could have been excused if I had ignored the call-out of a professor of a class I don't even take.

I should also mention that I was told to meet her at 3PM, yet Assistant Professor Kigamine showed up at 3:15. I was tempted to ask if she mistook this for one of her classes.

"…..Would you mind, before we get to the point?"

"…..What is it?"

Perhaps because she was displeased by being sidestepped, Assistant Professor Kigamine scrunched her brows just a bit. She seemed to be just as obsessive-compulsive and difficult as she looked.

"Where did you find out my cell phone number? I'm an extremely closed-off person, so I hardly ever tell anyone my phone number."

"--I had already predicted beforehand that you would find me suspicious. However, that…" she shrugged. "Can be done in a great

many ways. There are very few things in this world that can't be found if you wish to find them. Or perhaps I should say there cannot be."

"I want to know how, specifically."

This was something I wanted clarified. As for why, that was one of the reasons, or rather, the only reason that I agreed to meet her. A phone call to a phone number that shouldn't be known. I don't live a peaceful enough life to leave that mystery be.

"There is no meaning to be gained by knowing. Nothing." Assistant Professor Kigamine continued to parry my question. "There are many ways. You too could immediately think of at least three ways of doing that, can't you? So there is nothing to be gained. Nothing important or meaningful... this might be something important or meaningful to you, but the important thing is that I, myself, am the type of human being that doesn't pick and choose my methodology in order to achieve my goal. I wanted to know your phone number, so I learned it. Is that not enough?"

"....."

Enough.

In a way, she had told me enough.

More than enough.

"It is well to be wary of me, in fact it's a reaction I would recommend myself. The people that simply say that you should trust others have it easy. However, when it comes to making a decision about me, when it comes to evaluating me, I think it wouldn't be too late to decide after hearing me out. After all, you came here to do that, did you not?"

".....Indeed."

I decided to take a step back. I thought this was the type of person that's annoying if you dig too deep. Annoying, I say, but I felt like I had already stepped into her realm of annoyance, but still. Well, it's true that when it comes to the overall decision, and a means of responding, indeed, it wouldn't be too late to do so after hearing her story.

"It appears you came equipped with calm, rational judgment. I had

already predicted beforehand that you're that type of understanding person."

"So, your point... what is it you want?"

"Direct to the point," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "You were a match for my glasses."

".....Huh?"

It was far too direct.

I braced myself.

Whether she recognized my mental reaction or not, Assistant Professor Kigamine smiled a mischievous, knowing smile.

"Do you believe in what is called destiny?"

"....."

There it was.

There it was there it was there it was. Ever since I recalled my conversation with Mikoko-chan, the misgivings I felt! The malaise! The wariness! The primal instincts of avoiding this situation! I thought, in the back of my mind, that she might bring up this sort of topic, but!

Destiny, ah, destiny!

What a grandiose theme.....

Second only to *love*.

"D-destiny... you say."

"Hmm? Ah, I'm not meaning to say we were lovers in a past life or anything of that sort, so rest assured. I simply want to ask if you believe in the sort of thing that can be called *destiny*."

"Uh huh... Well, let me see, umm... I thought otherwise when you mentioned such an exaggerated word as *destiny*, but if you were to rephrase that as *inevitability* or *karma*, I would have to say such rule-like things exist? Reaping what you sow, poetic justice. In other words... the *apple* will *fall*, *rain* will *fall*, *the sun* is *bright*, the *night* is *dark*, *something funny* will *make you laugh*, *something sad* will *make you cry*---"

"If you are *living* you will *die*," Assistant Professor Kigamine smirked. "I had already predicted beforehand that you would have that sort of opinion."

".....If you say so."

Karma.....

Come to think of it, I don't remember the context, but I remember saying something like mistaken karma. Now, what ever did I say that for.....

"Is something on your mind?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was just reminiscing about something. So, what was it? Something about karma?"

"Fufufu. Yes, *cause and effect*--in other words what is obvious. What is natural, what is natural, naaaaatuuuuuuraaaaaal. This is a case where I wouldn't mind if you were to pull out the quote God does not play with dice. While we are capable of affecting the minute details of the future, we cannot change **things like** the greater current. *Not dying* while *being alive* is something that no one can do."

"....."

"Nobody."

The way she spoke sounded like she was persuading herself more than she was speaking to me. It seems this person, in a characteristic not uncommon among the obsessive-compulsive, did not take any heed to the existence of others. While it would be hypocritical of me to say anything about that trait, I still found it difficult to accept, having been called out here by the person in question.

"I understand it was rude, but I investigated your background."

Suddenly, Assistant Professor Kigamine seemed to make a declaration.

And then she curled her lips, seemingly pleased.

"Interesting. Your background is truly interesting."

"....."

Background... that word alone indicated nothing about how much she had dug up. That, or at least going that far, was certainly on a different level than looking up my cell phone number. Kunagisa would have **favorably** manipulated the critical points even without my asking. Half-assed information gathering abilities would simply lead to a pile of faux knowledge. However, what about this person.....? I may be speaking subjectively, but from my experience thus far, **this sort** of

person is extremely skilled at these things. I wouldn't go so far as to say the snake knows the snake's path best, but.....

"It's already impressive for you to have been affiliated with the ER3 System, but what was truly astonishing were the records you left behind. To be honest, it's impossible for me to comprehend why you would drop out of the ER Program and leave yourself in the care of such an outward, northern island, and in a common university at that."

"You know about the ER Program."

Well, not that it's particularly hard to find that out, given that I had been making no effort to hide that fact. There's nothing you can really do to hide that you have studied abroad. That was why, although my problems **preceded that**, the ER3 brand name stood out to professors with all its shining glory.

"However, I would imagine *the records I left* behind are untrue. When I was over there, I was buddies with one Omokage Magokoro. I simply couldn't keep up in their system and turned tail and came home. I'm a drop-out, a drop-out. Part of it may have been homesickness. But anyways, the person I was buddies with was incredible, and I think our doings may have been....."

"And then, even after you returned to Japan, you had a hand in a lot of things. A lot, a lot. Aaaaaa looooooooot."

Assistant Professor Kigamine continued, completely ignoring me. I would prefer if she listened to people even just a tiny bit.

"For example, this May. Several students at the Rokumeikan Private University, which you attend, passed away. And not because of an accident or something, but because of murder."

"....."

"Murder. Murder. Muuurrrrdeeerrr. Along with what can only be described as a terrifying mass-murder case that occurred at the same time... it's said that with regards to both cases, like an esteemed detective that shows up in a traditional, stereotypical murder mystery novel, solving them swiftly and skillfully, was none other than you."

"Hmm... that is a wonderfully comfortable misunderstanding. In fact it's so wrong I cannot even begin to imagine how such a

misunderstanding could've come forth."

But the assistant professor didn't stop at my denial, as expected.

"Other rumors involving you don't stop at a mere few. And not just limited to those within the school, as you seem to be making quite the rounds. Well, of course, most of them, as you say yourself, are likely misunderstandings or exaggerations, but it's enough for me that you're a person that causes such numerous rumors, such misunderstandings, such exaggerations."

"....."

"You're interesting."

Assistant Professor Kigamine shut her eyes.

"You're truly interesting."

"Uh huh....."

She even said it twice.

"You're truly interesting."

"You don't need to say it three times....."

".....You know. I cannot forgive this."

"Huh?"

Cannot forgive?

"What can you not forgive?"

"**That a human as interesting as you has no relation whatsoever to my life**. It is utterly unforgivable. I want you to have some sort of bond with you."

"Uh huh....."

Wow.

I've been given many evaluations by many different sorts of people, but this was the first time someone had ever been so blunt with me. Ah... no, to be precise just once before, six years ago, by Kunagisa's big brother, by Kunagisa Nao-san, albeit nuanced in a completely opposite way, I was told something similar. However, even so, I must admit it feels different to be told this by a lady rather than a man.

"And yet, when I took a look, you were not registered for my class. And based on the classes you're taking, it didn't feel as though you

would register even after this year. At this rate, despite being on the same campus at the same time as this Kigamine Yaku, you would, without coming even close to brushing paths, leave this campus. No, in your case, you live a lifestyle that wouldn't make it surprising if you were to drop out at the start of next year. After all, you don't seem particularly passionate about classes, anyways. I couldn't stand for this. I won't acknowledge such destiny."

"Won't acknowledge....."

"**Destiny exists**. However, **that destiny is one that you create for yourself**. That is why I called out to meet you today."

"Is that so....."

I understood what she was trying to say, but how should I put it, she expressed it with such extravagance. If she were to say it normally instead of in such a bizarre way, it would sound a bit more bizarre, I think.

"Well, I agree that I skip out on classes a bit, but I don't know how to reply to this so suddenly. To be honest, I can only answer that you're overestimating me. There's nothing to be had by hanging around me. Although I admit I get dragged into problems quite often."

"It's my decision as to whether I am overestimating you or not."

".....Is that so."

This person really doesn't listen to others.

It feels pointless to say anything.

"You're interesting, but I myself am quite interesting, if I may say so myself. From that perspective, I don't think it's a bad deal for you to become acquainted with me, either. How does that sound?"

"How does that sound....."

"And in that vein, with regards to a certain allotted period of time, I would like for you to assist me in my research. I'd be thrilled if you could consider it a part-time job over the summer."

".....A part-time job."

"Yes, a part-time job. A part-time job. A paaaaaart tiiiiiime job. What a convenient phrase. Like... Well, that aside, I'll pay you a worthy sum, of course. How about 200 dollars a day?"

".....How many days?"

"A week, continuously."

One week... in other words, an influx of 1,400 dollars.

Hmm. Suddenly this conversation had taken a pragmatic, realistic twist. 1,400 for one week isn't too bad. I had at some point come in charge of quite a sum of money, but I had also used a significant amount of it on Hime-chan's academic fees and had arrived at a standard of living much like that of your average, poor student. As a result I could only look upon the offered sum with a grateful eye.

However.

".....Assisting your research... while I cannot say that I had never partaken in such activities abroad... experiments and such aren't my area of expertise. If anything, my speciality is thinking inside my head."

"I had already predicted beforehand that you would gently turn down my offer in such a way," nodded Assistant Professor Kigamine. "However, as I have come this far, I won't simply nod and stand down. It wouldn't be too late to respond after hearing a bit more, would it?"

"Or rather, Assistant Professor Kigamine. That sort of specialized research already has its own allocated staff, doesn't it? I cannot imagine you would be allowed to hire an outsider like myself merely because you want to become acquainted."

"*Merely* because I want to become acquainted... merely. Merely merely merely. Meeeeeereeeelyyyy. Fufu, you make it sound so pleasant."

"Is it pleasant?"

"In any case, my research has no staff. I request assistance every now and then, but in general I alone... well, no. To be precise, there is always *one* more helper at all times, but their circumstance cannot be described as being staff."

"*One*.....?"

It was said with a meaningful emphasis.

It bothered me.

"That aside, I fully understand your concerns, but in this case, more than experimentation or field work, I mean an even higher level, **confirmation of results** sort of help. If anything, I prefer for an

outsider, a non-specialist in this field to be giving me a hand. In other words, what I want is not staff but a monitor."

"Monitor... ah, I see."

Confirmation of results. Then I could nod my head in understanding of the relatively high pay. She's no longer in the position of caring about the remaining budget. Although relevant to just a sliver of university research, there exist many important projects that would impact human society greatly. I had seen plenty of examples during my stay at the ER3.

"It will be from Sunday, August 21st to Sunday the 28th. By that time, the cast on your left arm should be off and you should be fully healed, correct? I don't intend for you to be performing menial labor, but you'll be coming inside Takatsu University… is what I would like to say, but pardon me, you'll be coming to my somewhat difficult to reach private laboratory. Upstream the Kamo River, over one or two mountains, and then at the foothills... or just about. It should be from nine in the morning to about six in the evening, but I'd like for you to understand that the ending time may very well be extended. There are no buses nor trains from town, so you'll need to drive a car. Do you have a car? OK. Then of course, I shall pay for the fuel. A little over twenty for each day, round-trip. And then, you may be asked to stay the night some days. In that case, I shall pay you extra for each night."

"Ah, w-wait."

All of a sudden, she began speaking under the premise that I had accepted. It wasn't like I was being sucked into her pace during the conversation, but rather that she was the "my pace" type that completely ignored other people. There's nothing more difficult than keeping up with a self-centered intellectual.

"To date, I have generally gone with the direction of turning down such offers. I must apologize."

".....Such offers?"

"Yes. Picking up from our earlier conversation, the May incident. I refer to that when I say I've gone through some rough times tagging along with people."

I wasn't being completely truthful, but I also didn't feel obligated

to explain in detail.

"So you're being wary, if I understand?"

"Frankly."

"Does the title of assistant professor at Takatsu University's Human Biological Studies not provide any insurance?"

"I'm not very comfortable with titles."

Especially because a lot happened last month.

"Hmm," Assistant Professor nodded, pausing for a bit. "Stubborn. Assertive for a youngster these days. Even though you look timid."

"Well, thank you....."

Hey, wait.

She just casually insulted me.

"I understand."

"I'm sorry."

"So you're asking for higher pay."

"....."

I'm not.

I'm not, at all.

"How about 300 a day?"

"Woah."

The total went over 2000.

Way too tempting.

At the moment, my sources of income were being a part-time tutor to three middle/high-school students, including Hime-chan, and helping Aikawa-san with her job every so often. The tutoring made for a decent income, but if I were to really break even, I'd have to tutor way more people. Helping Aikawa-san made for good money, but it was always with my life on the line.

Hmm.

This was worth pondering.

"300 a day is still low, you say."

"Ah, um, that wasn't what I meant."

"I don't mind. I don't dislike youngsters who don't undersell themselves," Assistant Professor Kigamine chuckled like a villain. "Then allow me to unveil my limit. 500 a day. That is my limit after

taking your cost performance into account."

"500....."

That would mean a total payment of 3,500.....

How many hundreds is 3,500?

At that point, wariness took over. I don't wish to believe that happenings like the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility last month rolled around everywhere, but I started to wonder about illegal experiments.....

However.

Despite that, this was sufficient to make me understand just how much Assistant Professor Kigamine required me. I don't understand why, but this Assistant Professor Kigamine was quite infatuated with me. Hmmmm... that said, I feel like my tendency to attract weirdos was growing stronger by the day. Although, if someone were to say you reap what you sow, I would have to agree.

"It's still difficult for me to give an immediate answer," I said after contemplating. "However, I've begun to think it'd be alright to respond after learning more details."

"Is that so. Then."

Assistant Professor Kigamine took an A4 envelope from the bag that she had placed on the seat next to her and handed it to me. It was sealed tightly and it seemed it'd be difficult to open it on the spot.

"Please take a look over these papers. It's a rough outline, but it explains what my research entails and what I would like for you to help me with. And… if you'd be willing."

"What is it?"

"If you could gather a few more people who'd be willing monitors. I'd prefer for the monitors for this cycle to be completely unrelated to myself, so I cannot go out and gather people. Surely you have a few friends who you can trust?"

".....Guha."

I winced.

H-how could she say that? This person. T-that. That was the one thing that couldn't be used with regards to a person like myself. In other words, it was taboo. Friends who I can trust... that... that.....

"I'll pay them individually as well, but of course I cannot afford to value them the same as you. The fee I pay for you includes the physical directive to warp destiny, so in this case, yes, accounting for what I'm offering you, I'd be able to pay 120 per day for each. That's still fairly high is it not? Of course, I'm receptive to bargaining, but I'm also not demanding heavy labor, so it'd be problematic if they were to ask for more."

"A few... how many are you wanting?"

"Two or three at most. My laboratory itself isn't very spacious, so it'd be problematic if many were to come. And I do have a budgetary limit. My patron isn't that wealthy. So....." and then Assistant Professor Kigamine looked at the Omega watch on her right arm, which I presumed was intended for men. "This puts us at a good spot to end. If you're willing to give me a good answer, I can wait a week, so please email me at any time. My address is on the business card I handed you at the start."

"Ah, I cannot send emails."

"....."

She looked at me as if she were looking at a barbarian.

Shit, don't think that everyone has a computer. Is a cell phone that can't send emails that rare? These have their pros, you know.

"Does that mean that you're not well-versed in things like computers? I thought you were specializing in Information Technology at Rokumeikan University."

"Ah... do you require such skills for your work?"

"Well, to the extent that it's not bothersome."

"I can fulfill classwork fairly easily. I cannot send emails because of, shall we say, household reasons, or shall I say personal reasons. I did learn such things at the ER3, though."

"Is that so. Then I am relieved," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "Then, I don't mind you giving me a call. The time doesn't matter, be it morning or noon or late at night. However, I'm busy myself, so you'd be leaving a message in most cases. If you could give me a ring, I'll call you back. How does that sound?"

"Understood."

"Well then, until next time... if we have a connection."

With that farewell phrase, the assistant professor elegantly stood up from her seat. Her slender stylishness was magnified when she stood. Indeed, as Mikoko-chan said, the way she acted, the sort of aura around her had that feminine coolness to her.

However, even so, even after acknowledging all that, if I may say one word, her coolness was far from being describable as seductive or alluring.

Yes, this was just the first impression.

At some definitive point, Assistant Professor Kigamine was completely lacking in humanity. Even after conversing with her in person as I had just been doing, I was truly given the impression that I was speaking to a computer. I'd even compare it to talking to a cyborg. Such a supposition was of course extremely rude; however, yes, the more I thought about it, she seemed off as a human.

I took the business card she had given me at the beginning out from my pocket and looked at it again. *Assistant professor*, *Takatsu University Human Biological Studies*. *Professor*, *Anthropology*. *Professor*, *Biology*. *Dr. KIGAMINE YAKU*. And then her laboratory phone number, her personal website, and her email address (using the domain ac.jp).

Yes, it was definitely a business card for work.

Hmm.

Biology professor.....

I called out to Assistant Professor Kigamine as she left.

"Um... if I may ask a question?"

"Go right ahead," Assistant Professor Kigamine turned. "I had already predicted beforehand that you would ask me a question at the very, very end like that."

".....Specifically, what are you researching, Assistant Professor Kigamine?"

"You would understand the general gist by looking at the contents of that envelope... but yes. My research could be called a rebellion against causality. A revolution against the existent destiny. A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come. But without ornamentation, you would call it."

Assistant Professor Kigamine answered simply.
Without any emphasis, without any hidden meaning.
Without any particular emotion, without any rousing feeling.
She answered, simply.
"----Researching not dying."

2

It may seem difficult to imagine for those who have never done it themselves, and perhaps this is something tough to explain, but the walk from Kyoto's Shijo Kawara to Senbon Nakadachiuri doesn't require that much stamina. If anything, you could call it the perfect scenario for taking an absent-minded walk. It is, after all, the perfect distance for taking a stroll deep in thought. Well, granted most of the reason that I walked was because taking public transport, like rail or bus was difficult with my arm in a cast, but that is that.

Yet still, for the duration of the roughly one hour walk, I struggled to come to an answer with regards to Assistant Professor Kigamine's invitation. It didn't seem too great a scale a conversation and it didn't seem like an event that would go awry, but if I were to reflect on how often I've casually said sure and tagged along and found myself mired in tragedy, I felt that the decision to tread lightly around the sleeping boar seemed the best choice.

However.....

Personally, I couldn't deny my curiosity.

Researching not dying.

Not dying.

Even while living, not dying.

"....."

That is an amazing thing.

Romance.

SF.

Mystery.

Fantasy.

It's entertainment.

In total, absurd.

It was the same as if one were to say they were researching alchemy. Does academia these days accept such research? At the very least, it would be impossible in public and even if it were done behind closed doors, public universities wouldn't be able to boldly proclaim

their opposition to realism.

Mm.

No, that's why. Maybe that's why she's not researching within campus grounds? At the very least it's not a public, or publicly acceptable endeavor… I don't know.

"Well, I guess I can't know without reading this thing....." I'm not one to walk around with a bag, so I carried the envelope in my right hand. I glanced at it, but I'm not clairvoyant, so all I could see was the mere envelope and not its contents. "But this is getting boring."

Having returned near the antique apartment I had inhabited since February, my eyes wandered to the garage that housed the Vespa (a white vintage model) I was gifted from Mikoko-chan. There were two faces I recognized.

One was Hime-chan.

The other one was Miiko-san.

I stopped my legs and looked at them. I wondered what they were doing under this blazing sun, and found that they were absorbed in playing kendama. The red ball affixed with string sliced through the air. Come to think of it, after having been hounded by Hime-chan, I bought one at Osaka's Tokyu Hands.....

"Miiko-saaan."

I raised my voice as I invaded the fenced garage. Miiko-san and Hime-chan noticed me and turned to me.

"Yo, Inoji." "Ah, Master-"

Miiko-san was yet again in her jinbei. However, it was after all August in Kyoto, in the dead of summer, in the heat of the most powerful of summers, so she had taken off her jacket and tied it around her waist. Her healthy shoulders were emphasized by the black tank-top and it was a bit blinding. The steel fan I had gifted her some days earlier was sheathed away by her hip. Her samurai-like ponytail and that cool expressionlessness that remained unchanged by the heat.

As for Hime-chan, she seemed to have just returned from school as she wore a sailor uniform (although it was summer vacation, she was such a studious student that she was forced to go in for supplementary

classes every day) and a giant yellow ribbon. She was looking at me, yet the kendama ball landed at the end of the sword like it was drawn by gravity. Hmm, as you might expect of the apprentice of the former *Zig Zag,* Shisei Yuma, she seemed quite skilled when it came to playing with things that involved a *needle and string*.

"Master, where were you today?" Hime-chan trotted over by my side. It was like watching a puppy. "Ooh, that envelope looks pretty suspicious!"

"Nothing much. Please refrain from flaunting your strangely precise instincts. It's nothing that Hime-chan needs to worry about," I lightly warded Hime-chan off and turned to Miiko-san. "Good day, Miiko-san."

"Yup."

Miiko-san nodded, lightly.

She just nodded, and returned her attention to the kendama.

Pfoosh..... clank, thud, phwip.

"....."

"....."

"Inoji, can you do it?"

"Uhh, well, I did play it a bit as a kid."

Miiko-san handed me her kendama. I looked at the red ball and noticed that even though I had only bought it for her a few days ago, it was scratched all over. I stole a glance at the kendama Hime-chan held. Her ball was hardly even touched, as good as new.

"Alright."

First, I tried to put the ball back on the dish.

I bent my knees to act as a cushion and succeeded.

So, next.....

"Woah!?"

Miiko-san made a sound.

I was so shocked that I let the ball fall back out.

".....What is it… you surprised me."

"Fantastic... you succeeded on your first try."

"No, um, that was just setting up....."

It’s harder to not be able to do this.

The hard part about kendama is placing the sword through the ball, right?

"Hmm… if Inoji can do it, then wouldn’t it mean there’s an underhanded contraption in the kendama itself?"

"It says Japanese Kendama Association here."

"…..Mmm."

Miiko-san furrowed her brows.

"Humiliating... there should be nothing in the world with a sword that I cannot handle….."

"…..That sounds pretty ridiculous."

"Mii-nee-san is surprisingly clumsy."

Hime-chan cackled. And as she cackled, she made the kendama ball go *CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK CLANK* around the world and then with a fwip extended the kendama itself with centrifugal force, sliding the sword into the hole.

"Yay!"

"…..Splendid."

Yes.

Contrary to her dull-looking appearance, this girl was extremely deft with her fingertips. She could play eight kendamas at once. She was small, but as if she were made inversely proportionally, her fingers were extremely long.

"Is there like a trick to it?" Miiko-san asked me. "Hime has been teaching me a lot, but I haven’t improved one bit."

"Yes. No matter what Hime-chan says, Mii-nee-san just becomes lewd."

"……."

While I would very much welcome Miiko-san becoming lewd, I must point out for her sake that Hime-chan meant confused.

"A trick… but this is just placing it on the dish. Even when it comes to sliding it on the sword, you just have to twist the ball like this and it’s simple."

"Ah, that's cheating," Hime-chan heckled. "You can’t teach her the easy way out like that. Once people learn the easy way out, it becomes

a habit. And then you can't expect them to improve anymore. People are growing Asimov!"

"Those are wonderful words."

I grabbed Hime-chan by her shoulders.

"Then let us put those words into practice."

"Nyagi?"

"Instead of playing around like this, go study."

"Nyagiiiii."

And with that primal voice, Hime-chan slumped over.

"Come, come. Hurry up and go put the Three Laws of Robotics into practice." It wasn't as though Asimov himself was a robot, but I felt like jumping aboard her mistake. "First, you must always follow your Master's orders."

"Studying is boringggg. Boring boring boring."

"No matter how many times you repeat boring, nothing will ever change."

"How would you know that? Something might happen and make things happen. Why do you always reject people outright like that? Geez, this Master always makes me lose the will to go on."

"Oh stop with the sophism... geez, I don't know why, but you've only improved at talking rubbish."

"Definitely your fault."

Miiko-san said, spinning her kendama sword.

Hmm, that may be so.

"Master. Hime-chan, just now, and I mean just now, so much that it wouldn't be a lie to say just one second ago, Hime-chan just came back from school. Like a brave hero that just returned alive from the hellish supplementary classes. Why can't I play around a bit? It's like a warrior's break time."

"Warriors have no time for rest! Once people learn the easy way out, it becomes a habit. And then you can't expect them to improve anymore. Now, go ahead!"

"Umiii... Master is always obfuscated!"

"While I accept your opinion with some validity, Hime-chan, you should stop forcing yourself to use difficult words."

Obfuscated → × Obnoxious → ○

They're not even close.

"If you say so," Hime-chan nodded, bored. "Well then, Mii-nee-san, thanks for playing with me."

"Mm? Hmm? Uhh, sure."

Miiko-san nodded unnaturally. To her, she probably hadn't *played with her* so much as they were *playing together*, or perhaps she might even have taken it as Hime-chan *playing along with her*. She was a bit childish in that sense.

"And Master."

"What is it?"

"Bleeeh."

Hime-chan stuck out her tongue and with kendama in hand ran from the parking lot. Filled with energy, she disappeared quickly from our sight.

Seventeen.

But when I was seventeen, I wasn't that lively. I feel like I was a different sort of sunk, a sort of person lacking life.

Not that I want to remember.

"You're pretty mean."

Miiko-san said from behind.

"There's no need to force her to study like that. When I was her age I was a twisted fool, a small brat. Compared to that, Hime's a straightforward, good girl."

"But the livelihood of a student is studying."

"You hardly go to classes yourself."

"You're free once you get to university."

That said, let it remain secret that I had simply warded Hime-chan off so I could be together with Miiko-san.

"Ah. I wanted to play with her a bit more, though."

"....."

Oh, that was what she meant by *mean*.

What a child.

Asano Miiko, twenty-two years old, part-time worker.

She made a living by bouncing around various part-time jobs and

teaching neighborhood kids swordsmanship. While one would think she doesn't have that many expenses as someone living alone, she was passionate about collecting antiques and it had become less a hobby and more a pastime, so I had the impression of her as someone that fretted mightily over income.

"Ah, part-time?"

"Yes."

"I was fired yesterday."

"....."

And as carefreely as if she was passing a greeting, she continued.

"I clashed with a customer."

"Uh huh....."

She must've been working at a bar this time. Perhaps there was a rowdy customer... Miiko-san may look like an aloof, quiet, wise person, but she was actually the quick-tempered type.

"I need to get a grip....."

"You're apologetic, after all....."

This was the third time she was fired for the same reason. It's true that people can't so easily change even if they understand their wrongs.

"I need to find my next job."

"I see."

I glanced at my envelope.

Part-time. Work. Source of income.

Though they all mean the same thing.

However, even in such a circumstance, I can't drag Miiko-san into this suspicious job.....

"There's living expenses of course, but there's also the matter of the hanging scroll I found last month... I need to pay for it by the end of this month, so I'm in a bit of a mess."

"Is it reserved for now?"

"More or less."

"And how much is it?"

"14,000."

".....Wow."

Even among the antiques that Miiko-san cycled through as she bought, then sold, then bought with the money she received, then sold again, that number stood out. Simple antique cycling won't catch up to that amount so easily.

"How far off are you?"

"About 2,000. I was hoping to make up that money this month, but I was just fired from the job I was depending the most on."

"Is that so."

Kyoto is a tough city to find part-time work in too.

".....So you really want it?"

"Mm. It's an authentic piece from an artist I like."

An authentic piece.

How luxurious.

"Is that seller trustworthy?"

"I saw the expert's proof."

"Is that so."

2,000... even if I were to accept Assistant Professor Kigamine's offer, she would still not reach that sum. I would receive a total of 3,500, but everyone else would receive a total of 840. Well, the deadline is at the end of August, so she could fill the gap with other part-time work, or perhaps.....

But you know.

Even so.

I didn't want to drag Miiko-san into unnecessary things. Although if this were Nanananami, I wouldn't hesitate.

"Hmph."

Miiko-san's interest returned to the kendama. As I had suggested earlier, she spun the ball hanging from the string and tried to land it on the dish. While it landed on the dish for a moment, the momentum and spin made it fall back off. I wondered why she wanted to spin it onto the dish.

"Muuu. Even though it's a sword... even though it's a sword."

"Not that that has anything to do with it."

"Am I clumsy?"

"Maybe it’s more to do with personality. Miiko-san doesn’t seem the type to be suited to playing with compact trinkets."

"Compact. But I think it’s fun."

"....."

Miiko-san was able to state that something she was poor at was fun.

Frankly, I thought that admirable.

If I were a person with any bit of composure, I may have thought I would like to pick up that trait from her. At the very least, even the way I am now, I felt like I wanted to follow her example.

"Ah. It’s on."

"You did it."

"That’s a first."

"....."

The first time she was able to land the ball on the dish.....

Perhaps she truly is clumsy, after all.

Or perhaps a natural-born hard worker.

Then I hope she treasures her trait well.

"Well, I’ll return to my room as well. Are you free tonight? If you are, would you like to have dinner together? I can treat you to meat, to help you forget about your job loss."

"Unfortunately, I have plans tonight."

"Is that so."

How terribly unfortunate.

"By the way, Inoji," Miiko-san snapped the kendama ball from the air. At the very least, she didn’t look like she lacked reflexes or hand-eye coordination. "Apologies if I'm being nosey about this. But about *that thing* in your room, Inoji, how long are you going to leave *that thing* in your room?"

"Ah....."

"I don’t want to poke my nose into personal affairs, but this building has three underage kids in Hime, Moe, and Hou. I think that thing causes a bit of a developmental problem."

"I’m technically still underage too," I shrugged jokingly. "Well, you’re right. Yes, eventually, I’ll do something."

"Eventually."

"When it comes to *that thing*, it's partly my responsibility that things turned out this way, so it's a bit difficult to handle. That said, for now, there's no likelihood of problems that would bother Miiko-san, so please rest easy on that end."

"Okay. I'll trust you."

"Well then."

I flippantly raised my hand and when I had turned my back to her, I heard the sounds of the kendama resume. It seemed Miiko-san was quite enamored by such play. That said, kendamas are normally an indoor thing, so I wondered why she had bothered to walk all the way out to the parking lot. Well, I suppose that four-tatami apartment lacks the space for even beanbags, much less kendamas.

Four-tatami space, tatami-matted, with bare light bulbs.

No bath, a shared bathroom.

Nowadays you wouldn't normally imagine such horrible living conditions existing, but the people living in this apartment are truly unique and so being here is amusing and very pleasant, I think. Along with the swordsman, Asano Miiko-san, there's that old man I finally found out the real name of, Hayabusa Koutoumaru, the ran-from-home siblings, Ishinagi Moeta and Yamiguchi Houko, the Worst Witch, Nanananami Nanami, and Zig Zag's apprentice, Yukariki Ichihime. When placed alongside such characters, this very ordinary user of nonsense simply fades into the background.

Really.

Without a doubt.

Exceedingly and interminably.

Essentially and unmistakably.

If you allow me to sum it up in one word.

"It's nonsense....."

I arrived at the apartment.

Wooden and three-storied.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, passed by my neighbor, Miiko-san's room, and opened the door to my room.

"Welcome home, Master."

I opened the door and was immediately greeted.

"I longed greatly for your return. I recognize and understand the fatigue felt by the master of the house, so I shall do my utmost best to relieve your burden. Will you have dinner or will you have a bath? Or perhaps you will have me?"

"....."

Among the lines in this world that number as many as the stars, I was given the one that would cause the most mental damage. I couldn't even muster a response.

"....."

"Why do you look so stunned, Master?"

Wearing an apron and displaying obedient behavior, yet undone by that cool, intellectual expression and that shoulder-length hair. She smiled faintly, but it looked nothing short of fake. When it comes to the difficulty of measuring temperature, I thought back to Assistant Professor Kigamine, but if she were like a robotic, cold iron, this one was like pleasant, cold water.

Her name was Kasugai Kasuga.

Kasugai Kasuga.

An animal scientist that specializes in animal physiology and animal psychology, a biologist in other words. She didn't only share a temperature vector with Assistant Professor Kigamine. Until last month, she worked at the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility deep in the mountains of Aichi Prefecture.

I say that in past tense because, obviously, it no longer held true.

Last month, Professor Shadou Kyouichirou, who held the alias *Mad Demon*, and his research facility essentially collapsed. At the same time, that meant she lost her job, and because she lived at the job, her home.

"I jest. A playful big sister's joke. Don't look so seriously scared. How cute."

".....Yes."

And.

As for why that Kasugai-san is here. If I am to explain why she traded her lab coat for an apron.

----Here’s the flashback.

"Yahoo."

"…..How did you find where I live."

"I looked it up."

"…..How did you get from Aichi to Kyoto."

"I walked."

"……."

"Let me in."

"Why?"

"Beginning today, this is where I live."

"Why!?"

"I was fired and have become freely unemployed because of you."

"Guh….."

"I was fired and have become freely unemployed because of you."

"……..Well, that might be true."

"At this rate my life as a lady is at risk of ending. I would be happy if you could display some manly chivalric spirit."

"……."

"No?"

"…..No."

"I see. A shame."

"You’re quite quick to give up."

"Ah. I even prepared a maid uniform and everything but it has all gone to waste. A shame, a shame."

"Huh?"

"Well then, bye bye. Until we meet again."

"Wait."

"What?"

"What did you just say?"

"I didn’t say anything."

"But you did. Say it again."

"I even prepared a maid uniform and everything."

"…….Please make yourself at home."

"……."

"Neither seek nor shun the fight, oppress the strong and assist the weak, you wouldn't think that I wouldn't lend a hand to a person in need."

"……..Thank you."

"Not at all, not at all."

----End flashback.

Well, all of that might be a joke or a lie so it'd be bothersome if you believed all of it, but the truth might not be much different, or perhaps not.

This marked the end of week one of living with Kasugai Kasuga-san.

"Don't just stand there, come in. It's your home."

Kasugai-san waved me forward in invitation.

The end of week one of living together.

She was gaining composure.

Or rather, screw composure, this was the sort of person she always was. Although I dare not borrow Assistant Professor Kigamine's words, while my first impression of her was among the worst possible because of the circumstance of our meeting, after having allowed her uniqueness to shine through by experiencing a slice of life together, I could say that it's very rare to run across someone as interesting as this Kasugai Kasuga. She was so interesting that I felt like I had lost my chance to kick her out.

"Yes, yes… will you cut it out with those jokes. After all, there's no bath or food. This room doesn't even have a refrigerator."

"Yet surprisingly we do have food. I ordered delivery. And sushi, at that. Because I received some special income."

"Hmm?"

"So this is to thank you for housing me."

"Uh huh….."

That's quite an unexpected and kind act of her.

Special income, did that mean she had found a place to work?

"Now come in, come in."

"Yes, alright….."

Next to the bucket of sushi lay a girl wearing a manteau.

"....."

"Doesn't it look delicious? I asked Koutoumaru-san for recommendations for stores around here. Actually I took a bite earlier myself and found it to be quite delicious. Since you can't drink, we can't have a toast, but I did prepare some Oolong tea. This is called Red Oolong--"

"Kasugai-san."

My voice sounded awkward.

Awkward!

Awkward awkward!

"What is it all of a sudden?"

"This girl, who is she?"

I felt like I was talking like a space alien.

"Hmm? Well I'll explain that in a bit so let's leave it aside for now. It's better to focus on grabbing some sushi first."

"It's not better."

Not better at all.

I could stake my whole existence on that.

The girl covered in a black manteau was small and seemed to be asleep. If I focused my ears I could even hear her cute sleeping breath. Even standing this far away I could tell her black hair was grown extremely long. I would say something about her sleeping with her glasses still on, but she slept peacefully nonetheless.

A cute face.

Probably around seventeen, just like Hime-chan.

"....."

In other words, underaged.

Underaged, in other words.

Underaged kidnapping!

Kidnapping and imprisoning!

And it being a girl made it fatal!

"Dark clouds... great dark clouds hanging over my life....."

Ah... I can even see the Alcor star.

No, actually I cannot see anything.

"Please don't say such accusatory things. You'll make me pout," Kasugai-san folded her arms and sounded genuinely insulted. "I helped a person out. When I was taking a walk, I found that girl collapsed by the side of the road, so I picked her up."

"Collapsed... picked her up.....?"

"Yup."

Kasugai-san answered, matter-of-factly.

And then she went ahead and sat down on the tatami, crossed her legs, and reached over to grab sushi. She popped one into her mouth, exhaled, and briefly had a blushed expression. She's strange, but her appetite, at least, was first class.

Just her appetite, anyways.

However, what about her common sense?

"Wha- what were you thinking!?"

"What are you mad about? I mean you're the one that's making no sense and being unreasonable. What was wrong with what I did? Or are you saying that you could ignore someone collapsed on the ground and go on your merry way? That you can walk along without helping a poor little girl? That'd be quite the human failure."

".....Guh."

I never imagined being told something correct by someone wrong could be so irritating.

"Now let's hurry up and eat sushi. All the egg ones are mine. Hmm? What's that envelope? It smells quite interesting....."

"Please stop trying to progress the story while ignoring such an important event! Like world domination, only if the world were a village of a hundred!"

I was so flustered I had a Mikoko-chan moment.

"The police! The police, the police, with prompt decision and prompt execution and prompt immediacy, please call the police! We currently have a vehement need of the police!"

"Oh please. Don't make it sound like I'm a person with no common sense."

Tsk tsk tsk, went Kasugai-san as she waved a finger. Perhaps someone might seriously call me short-tempered, but right now, each and every motion by this person seemed to irritate me further. Ah, I knew it, I knew this person would one day screw something up... I knew it, so why did I let her talk me into this? Was living together with a beautiful lady that tempting to be willing to risk the rest of my life? There has been almost nothing good to come of this past week. All that happened was that my already small room had become divided in half!

"Well, life is full of surprises. And it doesn't always go the way you'd like."

The exact person not letting things go my way decided to placate me.

"Hmm, alright. Then big sis will offer a bit of advice to the young worried boy. What do you get when you write problem(困りごと) with preparing(備える) and heart(心)?"

"What do you get?"

"Distress(困憊)!"

"Shut up!"

"I sense some distress in your eyes ☆."

"Stop with the ☆!"

"This was that girl's only belonging," said Kasugai-san as she deftly stood up while changing the subject and pulled out a wallet. It was clearly one meant for a child, given the fancy animal character (perhaps an anime character) inked onto the vinyl surface. Kasugai-san unzipped it and pulled out a piece of paper. It was a business card.

"Here look at this."

The business card read:

Great Detective
Niounomiya Rizumu
NEONOMIYA RHYTHM

And then an address and phone number (land / FAX / mobile).

"....."

Like, baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang.

"Now, now, is there anything you can say as to why it was wrong for me to not carry this girl off to the police, or perhaps you can't."

"Irony...."

No, irony is totally irrelevant in this case.

The problem is the profession written on that business card with a round hamster illustration and purikura stickers plastered all over the back of it, like it had been created at an arcade.

Great Detective.

"Wow....."

Who cares about some biology professor.

This is even rarer than Nessie.

More unidentified than an UFO.

Hyakki Yako, like the identity of a ghost!

"So it has been completed....."

"And a bishoujo great detective," Kasugai-san continued. "Bishoujo great detective. Bishoujo great detective. Right? How could you possibly sell off a girl so amusing to police influence?"

"So that was your reason."

But that said, leaving her reason aside, it was indeed difficult to call her decision wrong.

A (self-described) great detective wearing a manteau.

Completely and utterly a suspicious character, undeniably unidentified, and certainly public enemy number one.

"You're right... a great detective surely must have a black manteau....." I was so flustered I began babbling without purpose. "However, why does that mean you needed to bring her into my room, Kasugai-san?"

"Because. I came all the way to Kyoto because I thought being with you would be amusing, but all you're doing is living a daily life. It's so boring watching you work as a tutor and fall in love with Asano-san and have little spats with Ichihime-chan. So I decided to bring in some trouble."

"I see, now that I know what you're up to, please shut that mouth and be quiet."

And then choke to death.

Murderous intent.

This emotion bubbling up in me must certainly be murderous intent.

"I hope she's not sick....."

I kneeled down by the girl and placed a hand on her forehead. It was a bit hot, but all girls this age are like that, so this was probably normal. I thought about taking her pulse, but her arms were both inside her manteau. It cannot be helped then, I cannot just take off her clothes. I touched the vessels in her neck. Thump thump thump thump. Looks perfectly healthy.

"I already performed those ordinary checks. That girl is really... Rizumu-chan is really just sleeping. I'm a biology professor after all."

"Shut up, Miss Unemployed."

I tried telling off an older woman.

Rizumu-chan, eh.....

A strange name.

"Is her surname that... Neonomiya?"

"Probably romanized off the kanji, pronounced like Niounomiya."

"Hmm, Niounomiya....." I withdrew my hand from Rizumu-chan. "I feel like I've heard the name before... but where....."

"Tut tut, you're a university student but you really know nothing. Niounomiya comes up in the Tale of Genji. Even I know that despite being a science professor. One of the largest stories spanning 54 chapters. And of those the first arc began with *The Paulownia Pavillon* and ended with *Vanished in the Clouds*. Although of course because *Vanished in the Clouds* did not actually exist the arc actually ended at *The Seer* with *Vanished in the Clouds* being a notifier to the reader about the protagonist's death. And then the second arc sandwiching *Vanished in the Clouds*. From *The Maiden of the Bridge* to the final chapter *The Floating Bridge of Dreams* is called the Ten Uji Chapters and includes the volumes *The Perfumed Prince, Red Plum Blossoms* and *Bamboo River*. Nioumiya is the name of the protagonist's nephew."

"Ah, I see."

I knew I had heard the name somewhere. This answers that

question without any doubt whatsoever. How nostalgic, when was the last time I read the Tale of Genji? That's right, back in the ER3 days. I read the English version for a class. This makes me run against the grain, but personally I preferred the after stories over the first arc. It felt more like an aftermath, like they were cleaning up afterwards.

"Hey, Ikki."

"…….What's with that nickname."

"Ikki," I was ignored. "Are you not going to look under her manteau?"

"Not going to look… please don't treat me like some pervert. And you know, I'm not particularly interested in little girls. In fact I think it's something else to be drawn to younger girls once you become 19 years ol--"

"I think your odds with Asano-san are slim though."

She said it so clearly.

I was a bit shocked.

"But you should check out what's under Rizumu-chan's manteau because it's amusing."

"Amusing?"

"Very, very amusing. The biggest reason why I picked up that girl is actually under her manteau."

"……."

I felt like I was being tricked, but I fearfully lifted the innocent looking girl's black manteau and peeked under. If someone were to take a photo of this scene, my life would be over.

She was wearing a straitjacket.

You know the one that people recognize as the one Hannibal Lecter wore, the one for extremely dangerous criminals on death row, the one with no sense of sexuality. Her sleeves were crossed in front of her chest as part of the clothing and even then they were tied by two leather belts and probably because the size didn't fit her, the sleeves were too long and she wore the rest of the straitjacket like a one-piece dress. Just a bit, just a bit if you really tried hard it could look like an

oversized hoodie. No, it can't. It absolutely can't.

I put the manteau back.

"....."

I am so done.

This is too much.

Just way, way too much.

I have lived nineteen and a half years to date and have experienced all sorts of trials and tribulations, but I have never experienced being in such a pinch as this. This is without a doubt the first time in my life I have been cornered on the edge of a cliff like this. I could feel the urge rising to accept the next time Wet Crow's Feather Island gave me one of their at least twice a month calls inviting me back.

"Leaving the manteau aside, how can you even take her pulse like this....."

"I wonder if this sort of fashion is trending with young girls these days. My my, I'm getting old. Does this fall under goth-loli? Death metal? Punk?"

"Can you really call something fashion if you cannot wear it without help....." and I don't think this falls under goth-loli nor death metal nor punk. It was obviously a real straitjacket. "I guess someone who's a great detective always has a screw loose, after all....."

I earnestly thought.

I guess I have yet quite a ways to go in sharpening my senses.....

"That said, perhaps Rizumu-chan isn't wearing that clothing of her own will," Kasugai-san suddenly began speaking in a stern, professor-like voice. "It may be child abuse."

".....Abuse."

Child abuse.

Abuse.

Those words felt like cold steel.

To the point where I didn't want to imagine anything related.

".....By who?"

"By Ikki."

"Why!?"

"Anyone looking at this scene would think the same."

"Guh....."

Shit.

This person is too funny.

A live-in biology scientist and a straitjacket girl.

I could no longer decide what to be more confused about. Perhaps I should call Hime-chan for help… wait, what point is there in adding more fools to the scene?

Help, Mikoko-chan! Help, Shito-kun!

"Ikki is such a boring man," Kasugai-san sighed as she looked down on me. "I wanted you to play the straight man part out beautifully there."

"Shut up idiot."

"Ikki is a boring man, so you aren't allowed to say anything other than a straight man's line from now on."

"Why!?"

"....."

"....."

"....."

"Alright, then I shall focus on being the straight man... wait, why!?" I played the straight man once, and then. ".....wait, why, why!?"

"You pass."

Kasugai-san gave me a thumbs up.

"Keep at it and aim for Oogaki-kun's level."

"So you turned him into that....."

Kasugai Kasuga's animal training lesson.

As if.

And then.

That was when.

"Mm... mmmm."

While we were fooling around, the girl, Rizumu-chan, turned over in her sleep. It looked like she might be awakening.

"Fufufu. This is your time to shine. What sort of excuse will Ikki come up with?"

"....."

I'll have to think about how to kick this person out later.

I thought maybe I shouldn't be too close by when she woke up, so I slid away from Rizumu-chan. I saw that Kasugai-san wasn't moving from her current position, so I hid behind her. Kasugai-san was a bit taller than me.

"You coward."

"Call me what you want."

"You child-abusing pervert."

"Am not."

Niounomiya Rizumu opened her eyes.

".....Mmm. Nya."

She raised her small body. She did it easily despite being unable to use her arms. And then Rizumu-chan looked in Kasugai-san's (and my) direction.

And then she tilted her head to the side.

Her large, black and white eyes.

Just stared.

Purely inquisitive.

Strange.

Weird.

Surprise.

Suspicion.

Caution.

And then, fear.

"Uuuuuu---"

She began winding up.

"Uukyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

A glass-shattering shriek.

With tears produced by scream!

Shit! It's all over!

This is where the User of Nonsense ends!

Thank you for reading!

"It’s, it’s, it’s sushi!"

"…..Huh?"

"Thank you for the meal!"

With the force of a starved beast, Rizumu-chan began gorging on the platter of sushi. Without the use of her arms, she looked like a dog, but she ate with such ferocity that I could not even comment on how it was rude of her.

"Ah! The eggs are mine!"

Kasugai-san hurriedly shouted, after skipping a beat.

Now that I think about it, this was the first time I have ever heard this person raise her voice… and that was when I finally thought, are you really using your savings on this?

How wasteful…..

"....."

I had nothing to do and nothing to say, so I simply stood quietly and watched this manteau-wearing great detective and apron-wearing biology scientist fight over sushi.

Fade out.

3

"I’m Niounomiya Rizumu!"

Rizumu-chan bowed her head.

Rizumu-chan, myself, and Kasugai-san sat facing each other in a triangle. As we were in such a small room, it was like we were sitting at separate corners. Rizumu-chan had taken off her black manteau and folded it at the side of the room, so now she was only in the one-piece straitjacket. Although it was evening, the Kyoto night wasn’t particularly cool. Or rather, Kyoto feels much more like summer during the night. However, I also feel that it’s cruel to place the blame solely on Kyoto for the damp, overbearing air I currently suffocated in.

"Sixteen years old! A great detective!"

"....."

"I see. I’m Kasugai Kasuga. A biology professor."

Kasugai-san answered without missing a beat and extended her right hand. Rizumu-chan, with her arms strapped, simply smiled. It was an incredibly innocent smile, one that insinuated being out of touch with reality.

"This person is Ikki. A user of nonsense."

"Please don’t just go ahead and introduce others."

"And so."

Rizumu-chan switched expressions and looked at us. I could almost sense a bit of weight behind that look, allowing me to nod my head at her self-proclaimed great detective-ness. If only she didn’t have so many grains of rice stuck around her mouth.

"Why am I in a place like this?"

She asked.

.....But even if you asked me.

This is a critical problem.

Because I would like to ask that too.

I would like to ask God.

God, are you stupid?

"My my, don't call it a place like this. After all, it's my home you know?"

"It's not your home," I said. "Kasugai-san. You're simply complicating things, so please shut up for a while."

"I want to make things complicated."

"Shut up. I'll kill you." I looked away from Kasugai-san and faced Rizumu-chan. And then I used the high-level technique of lying without falsifying the truth. "As for the question of why you're here in a place like this... well, that nice lady over there wasn't able to leave you alone lying around like that and picked you up."

"Lying around!" Rizumu-chan looked surprised. "W- where? Where was I lying around this time?"

This time?

This time means there was a last time.

I cocked my head to the side and looked at Kasugai-san.

"Where was she lying around?"

"Below the bridge near Kamogawa Park."

She answered. Saying Kamogawa Park didn't narrow the area down any given its size, but that aside, that's quite the distance to go for a walk.

Well, I suppose the strange behavior of this person has quite some reach.

She has nothing to do anyways.

"Ah, I see I see," Rizumu-chan nodded in acceptance. "Well then, thank you very much! I love you, Onee-san!"

And her graciousness was very friendly and intimate. But it wasn't a bad feeling to see a girl filled with energy. This world has been filled with many sarcastic brats of late, after all.

"Please, it's nothing to thank me over. I simply did what's normal for a civilized human being," Kasugai-san said despite undoubtedly not thinking anything of the sort. She was most assuredly one of those sarcastic brats in her day.

"By the way, if I may ask, what sort of profession is a great detective?"

And then she continued with a question in which she undoubtedly had no interest.

She was obviously just having fun.

"Fufun."

Rizumu-chan proudly smiled.

"Well, I would describe it as mental labor."

"Wow."

Kasugai-san tried to sound amazed.

It reeked of a bluff.

"But if I were to say one thing, a great detective isn't a profession, Onee-san, Onii-san. A great detective is a way of life!"

Rizumu-chan smiled, showing off.

Oh no, she's an idiot.

She said a way of life.

"That's cool, very cool, very cool. A way of life. I admire those things," Kasugai-san was into this now, acting out a personality that made no sense. "By the way, what is that straitja-mgh."

I hurriedly, with my body and soul, rushed over and smothered Kasugai-san's mouth.

Phew, that was close.

Idiot, how could you be asking such a pointed question so easily? How dense can you be? What happens if she truly were a victim of child abuse? What would you do then?

"What's wrong?"

"No, no, nothing, nothing. I just suddenly wanted to do a pro wrestling move... hey, Kasugai-san, please don't lick my finger!"

I reflexively let Kasugai-san go. W- what's this feeling going through my body? All she did was lick my fingertip... I ended up glaring at Kasugi-san, who in turn stuck her tongue out through her thin lips, and then shot me a seductive look.

Scary!

Kasugai Kasuga, seriously scary!

".....Umm. Now that we know where you were found knocked out, could you tell us why you were lying there? Was it related to being a detective?"

"Not a detective, a great detective!"

She corrected that slight difference.

She appears to have an odd fixation.

"Now. As for why, yeah, I was probably starving. When I'm concentrating, I forget to eat. I was probably pretty wobbly because I hadn't eaten in three days."

"....."

That explains her appetite.

I see.

"However, *probably* seems pretty vague."

"I lose consciousness a lot. Habitually losing consciousness, or something? Sometimes I wake up in a place I don't recognize, in a town I don't recognize, and my memory is gone. It always happens."

".....Huh?"

That.....

That's pretty dangerous, is it not?

Does that mean she has... an illness?

Nar- something, that sleepiness illness, that I forget the name of.

"But this is the first time I woke up and found delicious sushi right in front of me. Geez, thanks for the meal. I love sushi!"

"No no, think nothing of it," Kasugai-san answered matter-of-factly. "Don't worry about paying for it either."

"Ahah, lady, you're just as kind as you look. I love you! But I can't just accept that... ah, that reminds me!" Rizumu-chan stood up abruptly as if going *gasp*! "My, my wallet is gone!"

"That would be right here. It was in the pocket of your manteau," Kasugai-san handed her the wallet. I say handed, but Rizumu-chan grabbed it in her mouth. She must have -7 lifestyle points. "It was dangerous so I hung onto it. I know it's rude, but I also wanted to know your name."

"Why thank you... Hey, it's empty!" Rizumu-chan wailed. "Stolen again! There was 30,000 yen this time too! Only coins and my business card are left!"

"Poor soul. It must have been stolen while you were knocked out."

Kasugai-san said with an expression filled with sympathy.

I looked at the sushi platter that was as empty as the wallet. I confirmed the name of the store engraved with green.

Hmm, this store, with this platter, with this amount, would be roughly 30,000 yen.....

Special income.

That meant a special source of income.

Special as in not normal.

"....."

Are you a demon?

I'll say it however many times.

Are you a demon!?

".....Well, I was able to eat some sushi, so I'll give up on that," said Rizumu-chan even though she was clearly still affected and then she headed toward her folded manteau. "And because there's no need to stay, I thought I should begin my retreat."

"Is that so."

".....Huh. I wonder where to stay tonight....."

"Stay, you mean you don't live around here?"

"I'm a wanderer from one journey to the next."

"Wanderer?"

"Romanticist."

Ah.

Come to think of it, the name on her business card wasn't something I recognized as being in Kyoto. I don't remember where that postal code was for, either. Given her profession (way of life) as a great detective, from one journey to the next must refer to being away from home often.

"You should divide risks if you're journeying. Like keeping at least three wallets on you. I did that while coming to Kyoto myself."

Kasugai-san did not hesitate in offering advice, as though she had experienced it herself. I will never again trust this person.

"....."

Running out of funds in the middle of a trip is quite alarming.

".....Onii-san."

"Yes, what is it?"

I defaulted to a polite tone.

"Could you put my manteau on me?"

".....Yes."

Commenting is forbidden.

I picked up the manteau and like the top-class butler Sebastian (made-up name), I put the manteau back on Rizumu-chan. "Thank you," she bowed her head. Even after raising her head again, perhaps subconsciously, her back still dropped.

Pitiful.

It was too pitiful.

It was so pitiful, it was like the king of pitiful.

More than anything, the lack of recognition of one's own pitiful state was what was definitively pitiful. These are the sorts of people that become abused by the powers that be in human society. "Huh? I can't find it anymore, oh well."

.....

I could no longer contain my guilt.

"..... Rizumu-chan. Do you want me to lend you some money?"

"Really!?"

Rizumu-chan spun around.

"Yes... although I don't have much to spare."

"Thank you! Onii-san, I love you!"

Thud!

Rizumu-chan charged into me for a hug. Obviously because she could not use her arms, it simply turned into a bodyslam. It was a surprisingly heavy blow, and as a result I crashed into the wall behind me.

It kinda hurt.

"Ah… are you ok?"

".....Yes."

I took my wallet out of my back pocket and transferred 30,000 yen exactly to Rizumu-chan's wallet. While that constituted this month's living expenses, and while I wasn't living a particularly financially sound life, and while while while, I could not worry about that right now. I placed 30,000 yen in Rizumu-chan's manteau pocket.

"And Rizumu-chan, you should not casually say you love people."

"? Why?"

"Because fondness leads to being taken advantage of. Well of course, that's different if you yourself intend to take advantage of people that way."

"? .....Yes. I don't really get it, though."

"You say such dark things to innocent girls, Ikki. This is why I hate realists," Kasugai-san spread her arms out and shook her head in an exaggerated motion, as if sighing and saying geez, like a foreign host of a sales channel.

"....."

While I would normally agree with such an opinion, even so I could hold my head high knowing that I was a better human being than her.

"Okay. Got it!"

And you shouldn't be agreeing with her.

"Well then well then well then, I'm glad to have been in your care, Onii-san, Onee-san!"

"Yes. Feel free to stop by if you ever need help."

"I'm telling you to shut up."

"I'll still be in Kyoto for a while for work, so if we have a connection, let us meet again. I just arrived, so I still have to figure out a hotel and such, though."

".....Sure," I nodded. "If we have a connection."

If we have a connection.

Who said that?

Right, Assistant Professor Kigamine.

"If we meet again, I'll pay you back."

"No, don't worry about that. You can forget we exist. That said, what do you mean by for work?"

Was that not a way of life.

"Kufufu. Right now, I'm..."

Rizumu-chan said.

"Looking for a man named Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"....." "....."

"That's my mental labor right now. I'd like it if Onii-san or Onee-san called me at the number on that business card if you come across anything about Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"In... information....." I eeked out, stunned. "But without knowing what sort of person that is."

"I think you'll recognize him immediately. He has this super flamboyant tattoo on his face. Ah, but I don't think you'll run into him that easily. He's apparently really good at hiding. And he's dangerous, so you shouldn't raise your voice if you see him. Oh yeah, Onii-san, could you give me your contact info?"

"S-sure....."

I instinctively gave Rizumu-chan my cell phone number.

"Hmm. A good number."

"....."

"? What's wrong? That's an interesting expression."

"No, nothing....."

"Mmkay."

Rizumu-chan bowed.

"And with that, I shall take my leave. Farewell, Onii-san, Onee-san!"

Energetic to the end, the self-proclaimed great detective, Niounomiya Rizumu formally bowed, shook her hand, and left the room.

All that remained was silence.

Not even Kasugai-san said anything.

I said nothing either.

Zerozaki.

Looking for... Zerozaki Hitoshiki?

Looking for, she said?

"Zerozaki....." Kasugai-san mumbled after what felt like forever. "That was the name of the person who had infiltrated the Professor's facility last month....."

"Yes....."

And.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki is *exactly* the name of the serial murderer who had indiscriminately killed a total of twelve people in Kyoto in May.

Could it be.....

I didn't think I would encounter that name again in a circumstance like this.

The Human Failure, Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

The demonic child of the Zerozaki family.

The sub-zero blade that murdered as easily as breathing.

"......Even so."

I scratched my head.

There was no actual reason to be nervous. Even if she had come to Kyoto looking for him… there was nothing to be done. I don't think he's in Kyoto anymore, much less even in Japan.

Great Detective, rampaging.

Would it have been better to tell her?

"Hey… Ikki."

Kasugai-san called my name with a solemn look.

"......What do you want."

"Now that I'm full, this lady would like to do some erotic things."

"Do it alone."

August 1, a Monday.

Summer vacation.

A normal day in the life of the User of Nonsense went like this.

CHAPTER 2 — CANNIBAL (CANNIBAL)

0

I won first prize in the lottery.
"What will you buy?"
"Lottery tickets."

1

Phrases that come to mind regarding Aikawa Jun.

Free and uncontrolled. Dissolute and unruly. Broadminded, crude yet strong. Red. Humanity's Strongest Contractor. Someone who accepts any job as long as the money is worth it. Desert Eagle. Ogre Killer. Overkill Red. Sarcastic laugh. Always smiling. A treacherous look. The cynical, twisted speech mannerism. Slanted eyes with the white of her eyes visible between her pupil and eyelids. Stylish suit. Loves making fun of people. Loves fun, loves trouble a lot. Overestimates other people. Pokes her head in when she senses panic and makes things worse. Hates half-assed things. Tall. Does not think about how others feel. Loves manga. Confident. Beautiful. Reliable. Someone you would never want to be an enemy of. Makes you feel invincible when she is an ally, although you will need to prepare payment in kind. An aggressive way of talking and an aggressive attitude. Forceful, unreasonable, selfish. Liar, with no trepidation over fooling others. Witty, although she doesn't make use of it often. Or rather, she prefers violent resolutions. Mesmerizing, charismatic. Age unknown. Probably somewhere in her twenties. Loves cosplay. Drives a bright red cobra. Rides a Ducati, of course (imported), although I have never seen it.

"So? .....What happened after that?"

"What do you mean, after that?"

"That great detective, Niounomiya Rizumu, did you call and tell her? That you're doing something super pointless and stupid, so you look totally stupid and dumb right now."

"No... not really."

"Why? You should've told her."

"It's a pain. And I don't want anything to do with her."

"Really? Looks really fun."

"A little girl who's a great detective while wearing a manteau and a straitjacket and glasses?"

"Looks really fun."

"No thanks. I shall retreat."

"Ah. Got it."

Aikawa-san nodded knowingly.

August 4th.

I was near Shijo Kawaramachi again.

I was having lunch in the spaghetti restaurant above that large bookstore with Aikawa-san, or rather while sitting across from Aikawa Jun.

She invited me out of the blue yesterday.

Like this----

"Yo, Ii-tan. You free tomorrow? Because we're going to lunch."

"Huh? Tomorrow? I need to help Hime-chan with her studies all of tomorrow."

"Hmm. Well, you're free if you cancel that, then."

"....."

"See you then!"

-- Like that.

.....

I'm sorry, Hime-chan.

Aikawa-san was wearing a rather, what would you say, rough style of clothing today. Would you call it a young style, because she was wearing a tight fitting t-shirt with her coat wrapped around her waist, slim jeans that looked like a pain to wear and take off, and instead of her usual high heels, wore sports shoes that resembled sandals except with thick soles, had a bandanna on, and tied her hair back. Everything she wore emphasized red, as usual, but it was almost

like she was wearing a disguise.

"Hmm? This outfit? Nah, it's not a disguise or anything. I'm off today and having some private time. So I dressed up to match Ii-tan. Might as well have a day like this once in a while, it being a date and all."

".....This was a date?"

I came here filled with trepidation assuming that she was going to push another ridiculous job onto me. However, now that she mentions it, I could sort of agree with what Aikawa-san said. After all, considering Aikawa-san's normal crimson suit, no one in their right mind would think us a couple… but rather a lady and her servant, or something like that. Well, not that we looked like a fit even with her dressing more normally.

"This isn't half-bad, right?"

"Well, Aikawa-san looks great no matter what you wear, although I did laugh at the nurse outfit you wore once."

".....I said not to call me by my last name. Only enemies call me by my last name. Well, it's getting pretty annoying correcting you all the time. You're quite something to be able to beat me in patience."

After a hundred repetitions, it seemed our common ritual had become perfunctory. Aikawa-san elegantly sipped up her tofu soymilk-cream pasta. Despite her rough look and mannerisms, she was astonishingly well-practiced when it came to etiquette.

She had probably been trained well.

.....

Trained, eh?

"So, Ii-tan."

"Yes?"

"How've you been?"

".....More or less as I just told you. I was invited to a part-time job by the assistant professor and then picked up a great detective and oh, the cast on my left arm finally came off. See, see," I waved my left arm around. "It's not all healed yet, but I have regained some level of freedom."

"What? Oh, your injury from last month. But if you think about it,

it's quite a surprise you were able to survive that. You did well, you did well."

"……I suppose. Even I thought I was going to die last month." I crossed my arms after hearing Aikawa-san's thoughts. "….Then again, that incident with Hime-chan the month before that, and the incident with Zerozaki before that, and Wet Crow's Feather Island before that, even though it lead to me getting to know Jun-san, I felt like I was going to die each and every time."

"Ahahah."

Is it something to laugh about?

"…..I feel like my life has gone in shambles since meeting Jun-san."

"Your life has always been in shambles. Even before you met me."

Hmm.

It sounded eerily true.

"However, *Niounomiya*, *Niounomiya* Rizumu, *Niounomiya*… you've become acquaintances with quite the name. Your trouble-making is really gaining some shine."

"What's wrong with Niounomiya?"

"Hmm? Wait, you don't know?"

"I know. From the Tale of Genji."

"……Zerozaki Hitoshiki-kun didn't tell you anything?"

"We spoke about a lot, but most of it was just idle chat… why? Is she a person from *that side*? Is there something wrong with *Niounomiya*?"

"…..There are things in this world that you're better off not knowing," Aikawa-san said, as she grabbed the check and stood up from her seat. "Let's head out. I left the afternoon all open for Ii-tan."

"That's quite the honor."

"Have anywhere you'd recommend? I come to Kyoto a lot, but I've never really come here to play."

"Hmm," I also stood up from my seat and thought while walking behind Aikawa-san. "And I'm no good at playing. A working man, you might say."

"If you say so."

Aikawa-san paid the check.

Aikawa-san paid for the both of us, obviously.

.....I felt a bit pathetic.

So, where to go from here… bowling or billiards or table tennis… but there's no way for me to beat Aikawa-san in anything related to athletics. It's not like she's my caretaker, so I didn't want to bore her with such an obviously one-sided setup... but to go along with Aikawa-san's hobbies, like what, a manga cafe? There was an offbeat-looking manga cafe near the entrance to Shinkyogoku, but going to a manga cafe for a date is very unromantic and shameful. At the same time, the typical, or expected move of going to Kamogawa and just sitting together seemed wrong too.

"How about a movie, Jun-san?"

"Anything good on right now?"

"No clue. Shall we check it out?"

"Well, nothing wrong with going."

We walked down the stairs past the bookstore and then headed toward the big theater in the vicinity. That said, that theater only plays the major movies, so I don't stop by often... ah, but Aikawa-san likes the stereotypical stuff, so maybe it'll offer a menu to her liking.

However, before we reached the theater, Aikawa-san said "nevermind," and stopped walking.

"Huh?"

"I came out to Kyoto, so why should I go watch a movie? Take me to some temple or shrine or something."

"Hmm....."

What a whimsical person.

The closest one from here would be Honnouji... but there was a part of me that didn't want to lead someone to a place I had not been to myself. But, being a resident of Kyoto myself, I didn't know much about the sightseeing locations. When I first came here, Miiko-san guided me around some places, so I suppose I will have to choose from that set.

Seimei Shrine... Philosophy Road... Nijo Castle... all far.

Enryakuji... that is even further.

Yasaka Shrine... Kiyomizu Temple, that was about it.

"Yasaka Shrine and Kiyomizu Temple, which do you prefer?"

"Hmm. Kiyomizu Temple."

"Kiyomizu Temple."

"I want to jump off the Kiyomizu stage."

"Please don't."

"I'm kidding."

"....."

Of all people, you're very likely to do it.

So please don't.

"Understood then. I must say that it's not far but it is a bit of a walk."

"No prob, I like walking."

"Speaking of which, where's your Cobra today?"

"Being worked on. Sadly, it broke. I guess I made it go through a lot up to now. So I came here by taxi today."

"Huh."

"Taxis are easy and nice, but it pisses me off not being able to drive myself."

"Are you the type that can't leave things to others? I don't understand that sentiment myself. Well, Jun-san's job is more to make other people handle things, as opposed to delegating... well, this way."

I began walking ahead of Aikawa-san, to guide her.

That reminded me.

It was so obviously obvious that I had not ever thought about it, but Aikawa-san doesn't live in Kyoto. She seems to be jumping around a lot for work, but then, where does Aikawa-san call home?

"Jun-san, do you have a place of residence?"

"Nnya? Residence?"

"Yes. An address where you can be reached."

"Nope. I have a bunch of places here and there where I can hide, but I usually live in hotels. No place I can really call a home ground."

"Huh."

That's quite the gorgeous life.

".....I thought Ii-tan was like that too. Ii-tan isn't planning on being in Kyoto forever, right? You're not living in that old apartment like

you're *at home*, are you?"

"I suppose… I am a rootless blade of grass. But I don't think I'll be leaving Kyoto for as long as Kunagisa is here. Unless something serious happens."

"Hmm. Unless something happens, eh. I see, I see."

Aikawa-san nodded in understanding.

Though I did not get what she understood.

We backtracked all the way to Kawaramachi Street and then walked south. If we made a turn at Shijou Street, we would run into Yasaka Shrine which could be a bit of a cold shower, so it would be better to take a left turn a bit further down. Hmm, that is a thought, to stop by Yasaka Shrine on the way back.

"*Niounomiya*, you see."

Aikawa-san suddenly said, en route.

"You could call them a professional killer group."

"…..Professional killer?"

That was quite a non-ordinary word.

Though I suppose one could call it a common one too.

At the very least, it wasn't a word used by this side.

"Yup, the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe. They're quite the name on that side of the world. Quite the *name*… hahah, yep."

"…..But it's not that rare a name is it? It could be just a coincidence," I said. "That girl, no matter how you looked at her, did not seem a professional killer at all. Well, not that she seemed like a great detective either, but I cannot believe her to be a professional killer. I can figure that much, from her mannerism."

"Mannerism. Come to think of it, the name *Rizumu* sounds familiar too," Aikawa-san continued. "What was it… umm. Rizumu the *Carnival*… or was it Rizumu the *Man Eater*?"

"That sounds rather flippant."

"I don't know much about them. They're a group of unidentified people to begin with, and I go out of my way to avoid the professional killer groups as much as possible. All of those groups are filled with oddly messed up perverts. That world moves under a totally different

set of rules. I'd fall apart if I spent too much time with them."

Mmm.

Well, Rizumu-chan was indeed a strange girl.

A curious girl, I suppose.

But nowadays, one could say that such a girl was no longer much of a rarity anymore. After all, these are the times we live in. As someone who knows Kunagisa and Hime-chan and others, Rizumu-chan did not seem abnormal enough to warrant an instruction manual.

"That said, a *Great Detective*… the Niounomiya Troupe starting a detective agency, that's pretty funny, but what do you think?"

"Don't ask me. Although, I still think they might just happen to have the same name. It may not be at the level of Suzuki or Satou, but it's not that rare a name, right?"

"Hmmmm. Well, that's true... Usually this sort of thing is just worrying too much. But this is you. Well, whatever the case, you should rip up and toss that business card. And change your cell phone number. You don't want trouble knocking on your door, do you?"

"Well... I've begun to think I should just accept that side of things."

"Oh dear. A change in dogma?"

"I think it's important for people to know when to give up."

"Ah, so you've accepted it. Is that because of what happened last month?"

"There was last month and I'm half-living with Kasugai-san right now. When you look at people like that, you start to realize you're totally irrelevant, someone totally low level."

"Kasugai Kasuga. Hmph, to think that she would show up again... an unpredictable turn of events if you want to call it that. Although she's like you in that you're both totally unpredictable."

"Please stop. I don't want to think of myself as the same type of character as her."

"Hmm....." Aikawa-san thought for a moment. "....But Kasugai Kasuga… she probably isn't aimless....."

"In the beginning, she said being with me should be cause for amusement, but I wonder. This is the same for Takatsu University's

assistant professor, but I would like for people to not treat me like a radio station."

"Hah. Radio station, that's a good one."

Aikawa-san smirked.

"Incidentally, does Kunagisa know? That the person who can be read Kasugai from either direction is here in Kyoto."

"Of course I wouldn't tell her."

"Cheater. Scum of man. Man of scum."

"That hurts, making it sound like I'm doing wrong," I said. "Kunagisa and I are long past that point. It's over between us. We are just friends now. Friends. A pure, platonic relationship in which each party respects the other but doesn't allow ego to get in the way."

"My my, a pure relationship. That sounds like nothing less than a coward's excuse." Aikawa-san gently rubbed at where it hurt. "I wonder if it's alright to be dawdling along like so."

"It is, of course. The world only goes the way it wants to."

"Only goes… the way it wants to," Aikawa-san repeated my words, like a cough. "*As* like **if you're alive**, **you'll die**… **researching not dying**. Well, it's an old theme, that's for sure. Immortality and Everlasting Youth have been the homework of kings from ancient times. Weren't they doing something similar at the ER3, what with everything they do?"

"Who knows," I concealed. "I couldn't tell just by reading the papers the assistant professor gave me. It was like she was just warming up the tea... well, not that it's surprising that she did not give me much, considering that I had yet to actually accept the invitation."

"So what're you going to do?"

"…..Hmm."

I paused for a moment and then answered.

"Well, I might as well accept, I suppose."

"Oh, you'd already decided."

"Yes... I'm still hesitant, but eighty percent."

"So, what? Curious about researching not dying?"

"There's that," I replied. "An apartment neighbor is having some financial problems. Needing 2000 this month. I've been in their care

so much that I thought I could chip in."

I didn't receive a response, so I glanced at Aikawa-san and found her to be staring at me with eyes wide open, like she had been summoned to the afterlife.

.....This was quite the rare expression.

"Huh? What what? What's going on?" Aikawa-san leaned in to me, and with practiced form, instantly put me in a headlock. "Why's that happening? What's going on for you to be trying to help someone?"

"Ah... no, it's not that big of a deal," I answered, flustered. This reaction was unexpected. I didn't realize I was looked upon as being so apathetic, not that I blame her. Also, breasts. Your breasts are touching, Aikawa-san. "Returning the favor, just returning the favor. It's unpleasant to leave debts unpaid."

".....Mmm," Aikawa-san released me from the headlock after my plain answer. "Mmm… uhhh, is that the one you mentioned before, the samurai-like lady? Asano Takuminokami or something."

"No, her name isn't that flamboyant....."

"You like her?"

Guah.

A fastball.

Right down the middle.

"As much as Jun-san likes me."

I tried swinging a light cross-counter.

"Hmm."

No effect!

If anything, self-destruction!

Self-explosion into a grave hole, no assistance needed!

"You're really hard to figure out. Does being unidentified and inexplicable feel that cool? Not that I care. So, did you tell the assistant professor already?"

"Mm, no, not yet. I need to decide on one, two, or three more monitors."

"How many have you decided on, other than that samurai?"

"No, I am not inviting the samurai."

".....Hypocrite."

"Call me as you wish," I shrugged. I was becoming accustomed to being the villain, so I paid it no heed. "Well, I tried inviting the apartment's witch."

"Witch?"

"There's one. Named Nanananami Nanami."

"Hmm. You know a lot of people. So, what happened?"

"'What? Why do I have to do work? My name's Nanananami Nanami, don't you know?' "

"....."

Aikawa Jun went silent.

Yes, indeed.

The Worst Witch, Nanananami Nanami.

While prefacing everything by saying that I wouldn't like to turn out like her, I feel that if I had even a tenth of her ego, my life would change quite a bit, and in that sense I cannot help but feel a sense of respect toward her.

"So, then I tried inviting Teruko-san."

"Woah! So what happened?"

"'Kyuiiii~! Teruko is happy!' Actually it didn't even get that far, she declined before I even invited her."

"I see."

"So I'm stuck."

"You do'nt know a lot of people."

You only invited two people, she laughed.

Well, of course I'd be laughed at.

I could try inviting classmates, but there was that thing in May, and I felt some sort of resistance to inviting truly ordinary newbies. And I didn't know if I could trust them.

People that I could trust,

Do they exist in this world?

Or rather, what does it mean to trust?

That you would be okay with them betraying you?

That you would be okay with entrusting them with responsibility?

"Ah, I know. Aikawa-san, would you like to tag along?"

"Hmm? I don't mind, but when was it?"

"From the 22nd of August."

"Uhh. Ah, then nope. I've got a job then."

"I see."

"The second half of August is gone."

"Shame."

"It feels like there's been a bunch of stuff going down here and there these days. I don't know why, but there's a lot of trouble going on, a boom in work big enough to make bamboo go extinct... but something feels off."

"Huh. Sounds rough."

Come to think of it.

Making Humanity's Strongest Contractor work for a week for not even 1000 was pretty terrifying.

"But I do need to call Assistant Professor Kigamine soon, given that it's almost a week beforehand....."

"Kigamine?" Aikawa-san said flippantly and continued. "Kigamine? Kigamine, you said? Just now?"

"Eh? Uh, did I say that? That's the name of the employer. Kigamine Yaku. Not the part of famine (飢餓) that's not starving (飢), but rather the tree (木) from Utsurigi (兎吊木) and the congratulations (賀) from Happy New Years (賀正), with the peak (峰) of Mine Fujiko (峰不二子 from Lupin III), and the approximation (約) of reducing fractions (約分). Ah, by reducing fractions I don't mean translations (訳文)."

"Kigamine... Yaku."

"Do you know her?"

Well, according to Mikoko-chan, she's supposedly famous. Though I don't know if that famous refers to within the school, or within some larger scope.

"......No. I don't....."

Aikawa-san narrowed her eyes and stopped, yet slowly, her eyes sharpened. She didn't have kind eyes to begin with, so when Aikawa-san narrowed her sanpaku eyes, it became difficult to look at her directly.

"I don't know… I don't know, I think... but I feel like I've heard

that before... no, did I see? Mmm… mm?" Aikawa-san began mumbling. "Kigamine, Kigamine... it's not that common a name, so I wouldn't forget if something happened....."

"....."

"Hey, Ii-tan. Don't you think it'd be better to turn that part-time down?" Aikawa-san turned to me. "I've got a weird, bad feeling about it. I can give you 2000, if that's what you need."

"No, I can't accept that."

"I can introduce you to another job, then."

"I swear to god I would rather you not."

"Mmm... you're right. You're right, but I guess it's better to take on this fuzzy feeling head-on instead of running....."

"....."

No, I don't intend to head into a part-time job with such a manly outlook.

"Ii-tan, you can pick anyone else for that *monitor* job you're trying to fill, right?"

"As long as it's someone who I can trust, apparently anyone."

"Then take Ichihime."

".....Eh? Hime-chan?"

"Yeah," Aikawa-san nodded. "At the very least, if she's with you, the worst won't happen. She's pretty much invincible when it comes to the math of combat."

Of course, she's no match for her.

Aikawa-san didn't forget to add.

Indeed, what with being titled the last apprentice of *Zig Zag*, that was true. The only other person to have cornered Hime-chan was the Strategist. She was more than good enough to be a bodyguard. However, was it truly alright to bring a happy-go-lucky high school girl (who was failing every class) into a serious university research study.....

"Ichihime's supplementary classes were until the 20th, right? Then she's free for working part-time from the 22nd. She'll make it."

"Indeed… but I feel hesitant to eat up over half of Hime-chan's remaining ten days of free time--"

"Who cares. She's gonna be bored, anyways. I'm the one with the bad feeling about this, so I'd usually be the one to come along, but obligations in the fleeting world are pretty strict and it's something I can't get out of."

"I see. I see... then, I understand. I will ask her."

Hime-chan.

.....She is a nice girl and all.

But I have trouble dealing with her.

Because that girl is somewhat like Kunagisa.

Bright and serious but careless, innocently direct.

To be honest, a complete opposite of myself.

"......There's just something," Aikawa-san said, with some exasperation. "I'm worrying for you, but you're lacking in the tension department."

"Huh? Ah, me?"

"You. What's with that? Aren't you worrying over something totally different from what I'm warning you about? That assistant professor might be something seriously dangerous, you know? It was the same when I was telling you about Niounomiya earlier, you need to learn to have some tension toward life, or rather a sense of danger, you know? Have you never thought that you'd die?"

"Like I said, I have long ago come to accept that."

"Come to accept that, eh… you sure you're not mixing that up with averting your eyes from the problem? Researching not dying is good and all, but human beings can't actually escape from dying, you know?"

"Who knows."

"Well, I guess that's just how you are. But it's like, do you actually have a sense of composure?"

"Composure?"

"Not so much composure and more reserve strength. You're concealing your true strength at some level, right? It's not like you've given up or that you've accepted things, nothing that simple. But that you want to live life at seventy-percent power. Seventy percent... no, more like sixty percent, about that much."

"…..I wonder. From my perspective, as the one you're talking about, I feel like I'm barely hanging onto life."

"In all cases, your own perspective is always skewed. And that just sort of looks timid, like you're afraid of going all out, like you're afraid of clearly looking at your upper limits, but you know, even though we're on different vectors, in that sense, I'm not really one to talk."

"? What do you mean by that?"

"Because. I can't get serious."

Aikawa-san said, in a rare moment of self-deprecation, although she still had that cynical smirk.

"In that sense, being the strongest is pretty boring, on paper. You can't battle when there's no opponent. Not having an enemy is a bad way to sit. That's why I always have to climb into someone's ring. I have to play by their rules. But at the end of the day, that's still just making a mockery of them by handicapping yourself, you know? Being so much stronger and invincible is cheating. Cheating and boring."

"……"

"Well, you know… we mentioned him just now, but the one that was just like you, who showed up in May. Zerozaki Hitoshiki-kun. He was pretty good, relatively speaking. At the very least, he was the best of late."

"Of late… then who was the best one, in the past? There was someone better than Zerozaki?"

"Hmmmm… there was," Aikawa-san hesitated. "However, that was before I was the strongest. There were two, when I was a kid, that I surrendered to, thinking there's no way I'll ever beat this guy."

"Two."

That's surprising.

At the same time, that should be expected. Aikawa-san wasn't *Humanity's Strongest Contractor* from the moment she was born.

Everyone has a past.

Everyone.

Whether necessary or unnecessary.

Whether favorably or unfavorably.

They arrive at the present, having stacked pasts together.

They reach the future by stacking presents together.

"Boring inside....."

"Yeah. It might just be me persuading myself to feel that way, but that's a long time ago... that Zerozaki-kun isn't a candidate anymore, either. That offbeat great detective isn't it, and that guy isn't around anymore."

"Is not around anymore, you say."

"In that sense, Ii-tan."

Plop.

She placed a hand on my shoulder.

And then she gripped it tightly.

Powerfully. Without consideration or mercy.

"I've got high hopes for you."

".....Please."

I answered with a trembling voice.

My voice wasn't all that trembled.

"Stop with the jokes, Jun-san."

"I told you once… right now, it's definitely a joke. So that it's nothing that you've got to worry about," Aikawa-san let go of my shoulder without much resistance. "But I want to see it once, myself... your seriousness. That's terrifying and truth be told, it might be better to take you out before you ever pull out that seriousness."

She did, indeed, tell me that once.

That if I were to ever find a goal.

And if I were to ever work seriously toward that goal.

What would happen.

Happen?

"......That is impossible."

"Hmm?"

"Because this is how I am. Vague and half-assed and helpless. I'm not referring to that conversation about Kasugai-san, but really, I have

no goal in life, just a person wobbling about life."

"A clear explanation," Aikawa-san giggled, heehee. "Sounds about right. But if you ask me, not living seriously, regardless of how others feel, has to be really boring for the person."

"Even if I had any reserve strength, that is the type of reserve strength that is too much for me to handle. One shall not touch overwhelming power, or something like that. Something like how human beings only use thirty percent of their brain and when you actually do try to use the rest, it turns out to be a pile of junk....."

"Even if it's a pile of junk, you've gotta use it when you've gotta use it. That'' how reserve power works. You won't be able to stay that vague, half-assed way forever."

Aikawa-san resurrected my words.

And then, she declared.

"Because you're living."

2

We made the rounds at Kiyomizu Temple and Yasaka Shrine and then ate dinner at Aikawa Jun's preferred sake bar and then spoke a bit afterwards, went around a bit, and then repeated taking breaks and walking around and then once it passed midnight, in other words once it became August 5th, Aikawa-san hopped on a taxi, and we went our separate ways. It seemed she had really only opened the afternoon, and so she was heading off to work without taking a break.

She's quite swamped with work, I thought.

I wonder when she sleeps.

"....."

And then I wondered.

Why was Aikawa-san working as a contractor? With her talents... no, you cannot sum it up as simply talents, that person, Aikawa Jun *as an entity* could do whatever she wanted to do and could attain anything she wanted to attain.

Living yet not *dying*.

Perhaps she could even pull that off.

At the very least, that is how absolute she was.

That impression.

Yet, why was she working as a contractor?

A contractor is simply a proxy for someone else's work.

An agent.

A replacement.

A substitute.

Why was she satisfied with that?

The same lady who was so insistent that other people be serious.

The same lady who said she wanted to see me being serious.

The same lady who said she had high hopes for me.

Is she not being contradictory?

Cannot become serious.

Means the same, verbally.

But they refer to a different spectrum, a spectrum too far off.

I cannot be serious.

She cannot become serious.

……That difference is enormous.

That difference is absolute.

That is the difference between the strongest and the weakest.

Even though one cannot necessarily call them totally separate.

"……That's right."

I had never thought about it.

I never wanted to think about it.

As for Aikawa-san.

"As for Aikawa-san… what is she really after?"

Or perhaps, what is it she really doesn't want?

Maybe I should ask her next time.

If the chance were to arise.

If I remember, until the next time we meet.

"…….Well, time to go home."

I turned around. As a broke university student, I didn't have the financial wherewithal to do something as bourgeois as taking a taxi. Yet at the same time, there were no buses anymore at this hour. In conclusion, I was to walk home. There was nothing to think about in particular, and it was a bit pathetic that I was doing the same thing as when I still wore the cast…..

"Ah… this sucks."

After being swung around by Aikawa-san for 12 straight hours, I was exhausted. I could call Miiko-san and ask for her to pick me up, but I didn't feel up to that either. And, at this hour, Miiko-san might already be asleep. I didn't want to wake her up.

I leisurely walked along Oike Street. Come to think of it, when was it that I walked around Kyoto at night like this with Zerozaki? Where were we headed then?

It was a pretty long time ago.

A lot of people died then too.

Enough to make me numb to it.

To make me feel apathetic.

To feel resigned about it, to erase it from my memory.

"Although it's all nonsense....."

Telling me that I'm living.

Me, the one that's living like I'm already dead.

"Living... dying....."

Kigamine Yaku.

Researching not dying.

Of course, that is just a metaphor, and just the assistant professor's way of concealing her thoughts. After all, anything related to medical studies is researching not dying, anyways. Liberal arts people like myself have a hard time distinguishing between biology and health science. However, Miyoshi Kokoromi, once my teacher, studied death. From that perspective, researching not dying wasn't exactly out of the blue for me and could actually be somewhat familiar.

However… is that enough of a reason?

To be poking my head into that?

According to Aikawa-san, there was something that gave her an uneasy feeling, something that was uncertain, and so the right thing to do would be to back off.

"……But it's the same either way."

It was always like that. Everything should and would, at the end of the day, resulted in the same regardless of how much I regretted or repented for things.

The future was the same either way.

Going to hell, or retreating to hell.

That was my life.

Following destiny.

Guided by causality.

"In the end, everything *goes the way it wants to go*....."

And.

I ran into the stoplight at Korikawa Street and when I stopped walking, at the end of the very long walkway, I noticed a humanoid shadow. Despite the fact that Kyoto turns into a rural prefecture once you get away from the central city, it wasn't that I found it odd considering that you typically don't see a dog much less a person at

night. Even in a rural area, you'll sometimes see one or two people taking a walk at night.

No, the problem was that the figure at the other end of the walkway wasn't actually walking, but rather lying face down on the yellow tiling.

20/20 vision.

Is it someone collapsed?

".....Hmm."

It wasn't necessarily because I had just been thinking of Zerozaki, but what crossed my mind was what happened in May. I found myself in a similar situation then and I lent a hand and ended up all the worse for it.

Not that it would necessarily happen again.

.....

Now then.

I could get back to my apartment without passing through this stoplight.....

"Or are you saying that you could ignore someone collapsed on the ground and go on your merry way?"

Yes, yes.

Leaving Kasugai-san's words aside.

If you were to ask if the guy who was just talking to Aikawa-san moments earlier could ignore a person collapsed on the ground, the answer would be no.

I didn't wait for the stoplight to turn green and jogged. Hardly any cars were on the street at this hour, anyways.

"Are you alright-?"

And as I got closer to that figure.

I froze.

".....Are yooooooou allllllriiiiiiight....."

A dark manteau.

Both arms hidden under the manteau.

Long hair, glasses.

It was Niounomiya Rizumu-chan.

"....."

Collapsed on the ground again....

This girl, she collapsed on the ground again!

I crouched close by for inspection and she looked the same as before, just sleeping. No, not just looked the same, she was even making the "zzz nom nom" sleeping sounds and then finishing it off by rolling over and mumbling. It reminded me of a salaryman dead drunk on the ground.

Uwah.....

It was like, you know.

At the very least, fate did want us to meet again.

"I want to run....."

I don't want this sort of connection is what I wanted to say.

But you know.

Even if it is Kyoto in the dead of a summer night.

It being a girl and all.

"....."

Niounomiya.

A professional killer group.

I felt apologetic toward Aikawa-san, but even on a second look, she looked nothing of the sort. Leaving her thoughts about Assistant Professor Kigamine's research on not dying aside, I didn't feel this one warranted that sort of caution.

Sure.

I'm used to dealing with weirdos.

She couldn't be any worse than Tamamo-chan.

".....But it's not like I can carry her on my back."

Kasugai-san had picked up Rizumu-chan on the first of August and today is the third. She had said at the time, *I hadn't eaten in three days*, so perhaps she collapsed under the same circumstances. Then again, did she not say she had a habit of losing consciousness? If that's true, then the first place I should take her is the hospital. But that comes with the same problem as taking her to the police... those being a *Great Detective* and the *straitjacket*.

In any case, I should start with slapping her cheeks.

Just as I reached out to her face with that thought.

Fwip.

Like a coiled spring, Rizumu-chan's body snapped up, and as if to avoid my hand, jumped away three meters in less than an instant. That was incomparable even to the agility she showed in lunging for the sushi the other day.

And the eyes looking here were wide open.

Wide enough that I thought maybe even the pupils were open.

"…….Eh?"

"……."

Rizumu-chan stared at me with oppressive silence.

And then I realized.

Maybe it was because I tried to slap her cheek?

"Ah, that was just… wanting to--"

The moment I tried to make an excuse, no, by the time I started, as if she had rocketpacks on her legs, she had already closed the three meter gap. That too made her body tackle the other day look like child's play. Her momentum was so great that her manteau ripped off and fell to the ground.

And revealed her straitjacket.

And she, with both arms sealed by the belts.

Had her mouth wide open, aimed at my throat.

"…..Eek."

I thought I was going to be eaten.

Aikawa-san's words flew through my mind.

Carnival. Man Eater.

Cannibal.

"*Tsuuwaah*!

Even before I could call it dodging, propelled almost by pure primal fear, I tumbled to avoid the attack. Or more accurately, I wasn't able to dodge her incisors, and the tip grazed my right cheek.

A sharp pain.

And a cold feeling, like I had been nicked by a blade.

It wasn't so much that it was painful, so much that it burned.

It wasn't so much that it was hot, so much that it chilled.

"Gyahahah! Gyahahahahahahahahah!"

She.

Looked like she was laughing.

"Gyahahahahahahahahahahahahahahah!"

"Hey... wait."

I was already kneeling on the ground. I wouldn't be able to dodge another attack from this posture. Even though it did nothing to separate our distance, I stretched my arms out in front of me, and showed my palms to her.

She turned to look at me.

Blood trickled from her mouth.

My blood.

It was red.

Red, red.

And then she laughed.

Coldly.

"Ri-Ri....."

I finally managed to blurt out.

"Rizumu-chan....."

"---- Oh."

And.

At last, she spoke in human tongue.

"You're the one that helped Rizumu."

".....Huh?"

I was surprised.

I stood up and stepped back from her.

She saw that, and disgustedly, laughed.

"Phew, almost made me eat you by accident... close one, close one. Gimme a break. We're only allowed to massacre for one hour a day."

".....W-what do you mean."

"Gyahaha!"

She roared with laughter.

Probably for no reason.

I was taken aback by her every action.

The way she talked was totally different. Not just her speech mannerism, but her ambiance, the emotions in her eyes, her everything. Who is this? It was as though, as though the only thing that was the same was the vessel, but that the inside had been flipped over completely.

A hallucination.

Is it really?

Who is this?

Her appearance... no.

Is it *her*?

It was like a different person.

Even though it looked like the same exact vessel.

It was like a different person.

That smile.

Those eyes.

".....Ri-Rizumu-chan... right?"

"Hmmm What? Rizumu? Rizumu-chan! Gyahaha! Phew, nice nice what a fun and pleasant and poetic and wonderful mistake! Noooo you're gonna make Rizumu-chan so hot and shivering and paralyzed deep deep down in the bodyyyyyyyy... yeah!!"

And then, roaring laughter.

As if unstoppable, loud laughter.

"Gyahahahahahahaha!"

She was.....

No.

He was.

He was coming closer to me, one step at a time.

As if playing with his prey, as if threatening his prey.

As if having fun, as if being happy.

"Not *now*....." and then he introduced himself. "I'm Nishizono Shinji... not! Gyahahaha!"

"....."

"I'm a professional killer contracted by order! With fourteen holy

crosses at my side, I begin executing my errand!" he said, as if *he* were roaring at heaven. "Right now, it’s time for Niounomiya Izumu... Izumu the *Man Eater*."

3

By the time I returned to the apartment, all the lights had been turned off and my room was a husk, with Kasugai-san nowhere to be found.

That person was like a phantom.

In her place was one letter.

I was elated that I was finally rid of the person who paid nothing for the food she was eating, but then I read, "I will be going with you to Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku's part-time job so best regards I cannot rob you yet but I'll eventually learn (just kidding. Aren't I cute?) Kasugai-chan @ silver and gold and balls are at any rate peerless PS. Regarding *The North Wind and the Sun,* don't you think you would never actually wear a coat to hide your skin from the sun?" so that woman had read the contents of the envelope, even though I had hidden it. Well, she had seen me come back with it that day, and given her former job, I figured she would eventually find it.

Anyways, that settled the people to bring.

Kasugai Kasuga, Yukariki Ichihime, and then myself.

It was a multi-colored party.

I looked at my watch and it could still be counted as midnight. But I felt these things should be communicated as soon as possible, so I pulled out my cell phone. University faculty hardly ever adhere to day and night cycles, anyways. And she had told me she was fine with being called at night. I figured Hime-chan would be alright with being told after the fact, so I pulled Assistant Professor Kigamine's business card from my wallet and dialed the number on the card.

"....."

I got the answering machine.

CHAPTER 3 — THOUGHTLESS DEPARTURE (DISMEMBERING MISFORTUNE)

0

You're the misfortune of humanity.

1

August 14, Sunday.

Today I cut my hair.

"....."

I stood in front of a mirror, then turned around, then faced the mirror again, and tilted my head to the side.

"Hime-chan… don't you think this is too short? I'm not an athlete or something."

"No no, this is how it is. This is how Hime-chan imagined it turning out."

Hime-chan crisply spun the hair-cutting scissors that we bought from the dollar store around her finger and proudly stuck out her chest.

"Hime-chan always thought Master's hair was too ragged and bothersome and annoying and irritating."

"Is that what you were secretly thinking....."

"From the moment we met."

"And it was your first impression....."

It was too much.

It was simply too much.

"And Master, I already cut your hair, so you'd just be complaining after the fat."

"....."

After the fact... after the fact… given the situation she must mean after the fact.

".....Oh well."

I stood up from the newspaper sprawled out on the ground with my cut hair all over and took off the towel wrapped around my neck. I

put my shirt, which I had taken off to limit the mess, back on and then I turned back to the mirror and stirred up my hair again. Yes, well, it wasn't bad. At the very least, it was certainly no longer bothersome.

"Thank you, Hime-chan. I like it."

"You're welcome."

Shling shling shling, Hime-chan coolly spun the scissors vertically and into her pocket.

"Mufufu, Master definitely looks better with shorter hair."

"To show my gratitude, I will cut Hime-chan's hair next time."

"Nuh-uh, please no. And Master, your gratitude was supposed to be helping with Hime-chan's summer break homework and the extra homework. They're due tomorrow."

"That's right. But Hime-chan, your hair has gotten pretty long too. You haven't gotten it cut for two months, since June, right? That's no good. Girls need to at least get them trimmed."

"Is that sexism?"

"No, not really. I just thought it was getting long."

"It's not getting long, Hime-chan is making it get long. While suffering with how it is. Hime-chan wants an image change for the upcoming winter."

"They say your hair grows longer if you do erotic things. I would gladly help if you so desire."

"How crude....."

She gave me a frosted look.

Hime-chan is rather into chastity.

"But Master. Why'd you suddenly want a haircut? Like an eyedrop from the second story window."

"....."

This one was hard.

So I gave up.

"Umm. See, look at this scar on my face."

"Yes," Hime-chan did as she was told. "Hmm. Umm, was it ten days ago, that after you went on a date with Jun-san, you said you got bit by a dog."

"Yes. This looks almost like a tattoo, doesn't it?"

"Well, until it heals all the way, kinda."

"So if I kept my hair long, my identity would overlap with a certain character. I was filled with self-loathing every time I looked at the mirror these last ten days, so that's why I decided to cut away."

Hime-chan tilted her head to the side.

Well, of course she wouldn't get it.

I had met Zerozaki before I met Hime-chan.

"But Master, is that scar really gonna heal? Shouldn't you go to a hospital?"

"Well, it should heal cleanly because it's shallow. Although for some reason it is healing really slowly, but it should be gone by next month. And even if it doesn't heal all the way, these sorts of scars are a medal of honor for men."

"If you say so. I think that's only for cool guys."

"....."

Are you trying to say something, Hime-chan?

"Anyways. I need to head out now." I grabbed the bag I had prepared beforehand and said to Hime-chan. "You can stay in this room if you want. Apparently Kasugai-san won't be coming back today. See you, make sure to close the doors when you leave."

"Eh… um, Master. What about helping Hime-chan with summer homework and extra homework in exchange for cutting your hair?"

"That was a lie."

"Seriously!"

"Hime-chan has a ways to go to believe me so easily. You will suffer in life if you don't become more careful."

"You're unbeatable when you stop caring! Hime-chan wasted an hour on a precious vacation day! The supplementary classes resume tomorrow!"

"Lions drop their children into a bottomless ravine."

"That's just population control!"

"Hey now, Hime-chan. You should be careful with how you talk to me. Despite how I look, they call me rabies at university."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot swim."

"Bungler!"

I left Hime-chan behind in my room as she warbled on in a tearful tone. I walked down the hallway and down the stairs. And then, into the outside world from the apartment.

Koutoumaru-san was doing his noon exercise in the courtyard. Apparently some dumbbell exercise that was all the rage a long time ago. But apparently the quirk compared to the old fad was that he was using a dumbbell weighing 20kg on either side. He was deftly handling the giant dumbbell like he was just partaking in morning cardio exercises while showing off his naked, tanned upper body.

Summer.

Blue sky.

Muscled old man.

"....."

I decided not to greet him.

Such good weather today.

Such good weather that I could only look at the sky.

I stepped out onto Chuudachiuri Street and then headed toward the parking lot. At the parking lot, Miiko-san had lifted the hood off her Fiat and was working on the engine. Even for an Italian car, the Fiat 500 required a lot of maintenance.

"Mm."

Miiko-san looked cool again today, wearing a sporty, black tank-top and a jinbei up to her waist, with the top tied around her hips. Because of the bright sun, or because she didn't want it to get dirtied by the oil.

"Inoji, heading out?"

"Heading out. To my friend's house."

"A friend?"

"The blue one."

"Ah, uni."

Miiko-san nodded.

I walked to the Vespa parked next to the Fiat and then put on my helmet and goggles. My arm wasn't fully rehabilitated, but I need it to be by the time the part-time job starts on the 22nd. Rehab, rehab.

"Hair."

"Yes?"

"You cut it."

"Oh, yes."

"It doesn't suit you."

Guah.

.....What a downer.

".....Ah, sorry, I messed that up. Let me try again," Miiko-san shook her head. "It suits you."

"....."

I didn't think it was at all possible to mistake *it doesn't suit you* and *it suits you*, but am I allowed to believe that she didn't simply say her first thoughts at first glance?

"Looks cool. Manly. Girl-killer. Beautiful."

"You don't need to force yourself....."

I was beginning to feel as sandy as a desert.

"You got it cut quite a bit. Hou?"

"Hime-chan."

"Well, that'll crush Hou. She always wanted to cut your hair."

"Even I don't want Houko-chan with a blade standing behind me....."

"I see."

Miiko-san understood.

"Miiko-san, what are your plans today?"

"Job hunting."

"I see."

"I may not make it."

"Don't be so depressed."

"Hmm. You're right, the lottery ticket I bought the other day might be a winner."

"Don't be so optimistic."

"You ask for difficult things."

".....I'm sorry."

Incidentally, I still kept my job a secret. Hime-chan and Kasugai-san are also keeping quiet. Leaving embarrassment or possibly

surprising her aside, I felt like the first thing that would happen would be a lecture if she were to ever find out. That was why, to try to obfuscate things, I was buying her dinner, or buying her livingware, or paying for her electricity bills, and piling enough dirt to build a mountain of financial help. Although it makes me feel faint thinking about how long it would take. And if that doesn't turn out to be fast enough, then at worst case, I can just make her borrow money from me. Not that I would have any desire to be paid back.

Anyways.

I need to repay Miiko-san.

She helped me quite a bit.

And is still helping me.

That was why.

Before I leave the apartment, before I never return to this apartment, I want to make sure I pay her back for everything she has done for me.

"…..Not that I have any plans to."

"? Did you say something?"

"No, no. Anyways, I shall head off now."

"Yes."

"Miiko-san, I love you."

"Love you."

And, onward with the Vespa.

My destination was Shirosaki, the most high-class residential area in Kyoto. It was a leisurely, speed-limit abiding ride on a Sunday in Kyoto, with cars and street lights everywhere.

"……."

Yesterday, finally, I had my call returned by Kigamine. Exactly ten days after I left a message. Well, I suppose from the perspective of university faculty, that's just how it goes. I hadn't followed up myself, anyways. Leaving Kasugai-san aside, because she has the credentials, I expected to hear something about Hime-chan and her age, but that didn't happen, and I was told the three of us would be fine.

"However"

Kigamine continued.

Even so, she wanted to interview us and run us through a sort of test, myself included, to measure our fit. I figured that to be expected, given the nature of the study. She asked for a preferred date, but because Hime-chan has supplementary lessons filling every day other than Sunday up to the 20th, she could only go today, or the 21st right before we would be heading out. But as it happened, Kigamine turned out to be busy today. We surely couldn't leave things until the day before, so it seemed we wouldn't be able to take the test during the day. It seemed Kigamine was quite busy, so I told her that we could go with whatever suited her best, and so she said let us go with that. As such, we would be taking the test tomorrow evening.

"I apologize for it being so hurried, but that is the only day I am free."

"No, I don't mind. I have nothing to do tomorrow evening, anyways."

"I had already predicted beforehand that you would be free tomorrow evening."

"....."

.....Really.

Are you a prophet?

"Well... then let us go with that."

"Thank you very much. Until tomorrow evening."

Tomorrow, in other words, the evening of the 15th.

Well, leaving aside the possibility of testing on the day before, I couldn't imagine there being alternate subjects this late, so the test itself was probably truly something of a ritual. More an opportunity to meet face-to-face and have a chat, and so unless something serious happens, everyone should be alright.

.....Hime-chan... and Kasugai-san.....

Something serious could happen.

Fit was a word that could hardly be used to describe the two.

".....Ow."

The cut on my cheek hurt from the wind.

The scabs may have torn off.

When scabs tear off, blood flows.

Because I'm alive.

Because I'm apparently alive.

For now.

"It's all nonsense....."

I arrived at Shirosaki in about an hour.

Kunagisa Tomo was absent.

".....A shock."

As I arrived at the thirty-floor, super luxurious mansion, I dialed her cell phone, but she had headed out today. You told me no such thing, I thought for a moment, but I had likewise not said a word about coming to see her, so this sort of happening happens, happenstance.

Of course, if you were to think about it normally, I understand that I should have made an appointment beforehand, but who would think that the little girl who always no matter what takes not a single step out of her house would somehow be out of her house the moment I decide to show up?

Ah.

Too bad, because I wanted to show her my new haircut.

That is quite boring.

"Oh well....."

She had gone to the hospital, so that was that.

Today happened to be the day of her monthly exam.

If I were to want to follow through, I could go to the hospital (the members-only Kyoto Branch of the Kunagisa Syndicate Comprehensive Hospital) with my Vespa, but Nao-san would be there if their schedules aligned. I didn't consider myself barbaric enough to intrude on some sibling time.

And I didn't particularly need her or anything.

Showing her my hair, well, could be done any time.

Though I couldn't dispute being at a loss.

I hopped back on the Vespa that I had stopped by the sidewalk.

Hmm, yes, I was beginning to feel a bit bad, so maybe I could go help Hime-chan with her homework, as I had promised… I said one should not learn the easy way out, but no matter the perspective one

takes, that amount couldn't be finished by one person. The faculty at the school probably never expected someone to be taking supplementary classes for every class.

As I was thinking.

I realized that I was being watched.

Staring at me with their back against the brick walls of the mansion. A pure white, almost funeral-like Japanese outfit. I couldn't say it was uncommon in the Kyoto summer, but they fit perfectly within the long-sleeved garment, and it gave me a very cool and refreshing feel.

He was also wearing a fox mask.

"....."

"....."

The fox-masked man remained silent and noticing that I had noticed him, nodded lightly.

I, for whatever it was worth, nodded back.

.....What is that?

Is the vintage model of a Vespa that rare a sight? Or perhaps he thinks the Vespa seems out of place in such a high-class residential area?

For some reason.

For some reason, I hesitated in moving the Vespa forward.

"....."

And as I did so, without a word.

The fox-masked man stopped leaning against the brick wall, and without a word, walked toward me. Slowly. Slowly. Without a sound on his zori, he walked.

I couldn't move.

".....Yo."

When we were two meters apart, the fox-masked man spoke.

"A pleasure to meet you."

Now that we were closer, I could tell that he was very tall. At least 190 centimeters. That made him seem a bit non-Japanese, but the

traditional clothing fit his slender form very well.

"…..A pleasure to meet you."

I returned the greeting.

I couldn't see his face because of the mask, but the voice, and the rather lordly feeling he gave, made me assume him older.

"Hmm. 'A pleasure to meet you,'" the fox-masked man repeated my words. "You're alone."

"Ah, um, yes. I am alone."

"'I am alone.' Hmm. So that would mean you had business with someone in this stupidly large mansion."

"Just about."

"'Just about.' And then you missed each other."

"Yes."

"Hmm."

The fox-masked man nodded.

"So it is, well, to be honest, the same happened to me."

"Huh?"

"I also 'missed each other.' What a coincidence."

"Uh huh."

It was hard to explain, but he had a very in-your-face, a very aggressive way of speaking.

"Of course in my case I'm simply *waiting in vain* and have nothing to do with this mansion-- this building, it stands out like the Kyoto tower. Rare for Kyoto… but I like it, this sort of destructive architecture. The utter lack of care for everything, the jagged foreign shape. I want to meet the politicians and architects that modeled Shirosaki… but anyways, I was thinking this would be a pretty good touring point and landmark, and it looks like the person I was waiting for will never get here because they got lost. People who get lost in Kyoto and Sapporo are helpless idiots, in my opinion anyways."

"Ah. But this part is no longer like a Go board."

"'No longer like a Go board.' Hmm."

The fox-masked man seemed to laugh at that. Although I couldn't tell for sure, given that his face was covered by the mask. It's pretty difficult talking to someone you don't know when you cannot see their

expression.

"By the way, Onii-san. How about we go somewhere and have a chat, as fellow left-behind blockheads?"

"Eh....."

"Since we're both left behind, you don't have any plans now. I find myself with some time now as well, so it's a proposition to kill each other's time. I can even treat you something nice, if you'd like."

"Ah... um, well, no thanks."

I found myself a little speechless. I was a bit stunned by his strangely decisive word choice.

"My mother told me not to follow people I don't know."

"Hmm. You're running."

"....."

Why.

Why do I have to be told that?

Though I am running!

"Yes, I'm running," I accepted it. "After all, if I step back for a moment, you look way too suspicious. What is that mask?"

"A fox."

"....."

I was given an explanation.

"A fox is a mammalia carnivora canidae vulpes vulpes."

"I know."

"You knew."

"Ah, no. I did not know."

I didn't know foxes were dogs.

Surprising.

"Hmm. Oh well. I called out to you because I felt some sort of connection with you, but given your reaction, it's probably nothing significant enough."

"Connection?"

Connection.

Destiny. Karma.

Fate.

Words that I feel like I'm hearing a lot more lately.

"Um, you....."

"Ah! It's Onii-san!"

The question I was beginning to ask was cut in half by the energetic voice that suddenly sprung from behind.

I turned around and there was.

Niounomiya Rizumu-chan.

"Wow! What an encounter, surprising! What a coincidence, to be meeting again in a place like this!"

".....Yo."

She was still wearing that manteau.

The girly smile went well with the glasses.

Both arms were in the manteau.

Pitter-patter, she ran toward me like a little animal with hair flailing wildly behind, and it almost made me have a sense of fondness for her.

"....."

However, there is surely not one human being that would complain about how this gives me a sense of wariness instead. I stepped off the Vespa that had been left off. It's difficult to make necessary reactions while seated on a Vespa without its engine running.

Necessary reactions.

"It's been a while, Onii-san!"

Boom! she started to tackle.

I dodged.

"Hikyaunnn!"

Rizumu-chan slid along the asphalt while making an extremely bizarre, grinding sound. It seemed she couldn't brace herself with the lack of arms.

"A-are you ok!? Hang on, Rizumu-chan!"

"Thanks for play-acting worry with such a loud voice!"

She wasn't damaged in the slightest.

And then she stood up using only her leg strength.

"I'm good!"

"That's splendid."

"You're late by three hours, Rizumu."

The fox-masked man said in utterance. Rizumu-chan jumped with a gasp, and turned back to him.

"I thought you wouldn't be coming."

"M-my oh my! Mr. Fox! You were here before me! As expected of you!"

"Three hours ago."

"As expected of Mr. Fox!"

"Don't be admiring."

"Thank you for your efforts!"

"Don't be thanking me for hard work," the fox-masked man chopped Rizumu-chan's head. "And if you're going to say that, it's I appreciate it. Be careful with your words."

"Yes! Mr. Fox, I love you!"

"You're fooling no one."

The fox-masked man chopped Rizumu-chan again.

And then he turned to me.

"…..This is who I was waiting for."

"……."

"Who I was waiting for, but it seems, from that reaction, Onii-san. You seem to know this."

"Yes, though while I know….."

While I know.

While I know, I would like very much not to know.

"Half a month ago, he took care of me when I collapsed!" Rizumu-chan introduced me without hesitation while I wavered. "And then he even lent me money! My appreciation would be thank you!"

"Huh. Well isn't that something….." the fox-masked man took stock of me from head to foot. "Eccentric."

"…..Eccentric."

"That sort of careless politeness will lead to no good. If you do that, this fool will forever think someone's going to help her. Or are you going to say that you're always going to be around to help?"

"Eh. Uh, um….."

"Giving feed once but then not giving feed the second time is

insincerity. It's ego, the pride and joy of humanity. It's also not good to give despairing people hope. People who've been given hope and start a revolution usually end at the guillotine. The ones that live in the end are the agitators that gave hope... however," the fox-masked man said. "I'll return the money she borrowed. You did this idiot a favor, I give you my thanks."

"....."

I would appreciate being given thanks first.

I was starting to repent.

"How much?"

"Ummm....."

But you know. That was originally pick-pocketed by Kasugai-san. But it is far too late to say that now.

How troublesome.

"Three hundred. Right, Onii-san?"

"Mmm... I think it was less....."

"Three hundred. Here."

The fox-masked man took out his wallet, and then gave me four Fukuzawa Yukichi.

.....Four?

"Interest."

"Ah... thanks."

The guilt.....

The guilt keeps growing.....

"Onii-san is a good guy!"

"Guh....."

"I wish everyone in the world were like Onii-san! Then things would be wonderful!"

"Guh....."

"I love people like Onii-san! I wish I could take you home for myself!"

"Guah... uguh....."

That smile.

It's a 'this world is wonderful!' type of smile.

The holy energy started corrupting me.

Is it on purpose? Is she doing this on purpose?

Is she trying to kill me with guilt?

Then that would truly be an unsolvable murder.

This girl… is she going after a perfect crime!?

I tolerated the pain in my heart and shifted the topic.

".....Um, if I may, how are you two related?"

"Love-... mgh!"

The fox-masked man's long arm reached out and covered Rizumu-chan's mouth so tightly that there wasn't even a millimeter of open space. Rizumu-chan, without arms, had no recourse.

"You know it's my profession."

"Umm...detective."

"Mgh... mgh... great detective....."

Rizumu-chan tried, anyways.

But she was being held at bay with one arm.

"Mgh Great Detective, it seems," the fox-masked man said without emotion. "And, if I'm to go with that, then you could say that I'm its assistant."

"Assistant?"

An assistant to a great detective.

That would be Watson. Or perhaps Hastings. Or perhaps, umm, Kobayashi-shounen. Not that I know much. However, is this person not too strong a character to be an assistant?

"If that's not good enough, then you could call me a patron... or perhaps a client. Hmm. Though words are pointless anyways. Even if I explain it with words, it'd just be futile."

".....Futile."

"It's nonsense."

A grin.

It felt like the fox mask laughed.

I was speechless. There was no reason to be speechless but I was speechless. It felt like, it felt like I was being forced into silence for a terribly unreasonable reason.

If I were to try again.

I got goosebumps.

I got such goosebumps that I almost did not get goosebumps.

The fox-masked man continued, "If you know each other, then I must really insist," he said while nodding satisfyingly at my speechlessness.

"Come along. It looks like you and I really did have some connection. Trying to go against this level of destiny is reckless. **Destiny is to be parried**, this is basic. Carving out your own destiny is arrogance to the cubic square. We're not being swept along by destiny, **we're allowing ourselves to be swept along by destiny**. Hmm. This is why I can't stop living... Rizumu, stop standing around like that. Invite this person, properly."

"Ah, okay!" Rizumu-chan was finally freed, and turned to me and straightened up. "Well then, Onii-san, come this way!"

"There are only bricks that way," the fox-masked man's unrelenting chop struck her skull again. "I parked my car over there... let's go. You, just leave your Vespa parked there. They won't enforce parking laws in a place like this....."

"Uh, yes... um....."

I took off my helmet and hung it from the handle of the Vespa. Ah, I guess I ended up being swept along like this again, even though I know this indecisive personality causes problems.

I feel like this happened before.....

".....Ah, ahhhh!"

Suddenly, Rizumu-chan shrieked.

"O-Onii-san, your hair fell out!"

"No it didn't!"

What is this girl saying.

Those words are taboo to an adult boy.

"I cut it as a change of pace."

"Huh. I see."

"Looks good doesn't it?"

"....."

She paled.

.....Whatever.

"Stop dawdling. Hurry up."

The fox-masked man said as he walked ahead. I hadn't actually given him an answer, but this person seems quite forceful.

Destiny is for you to create.

This, Assistant Professor Kigamine had said.

Yet in most cases, destiny is a constantly churning gear that keeps spinning like a wheel regardless of your actions.

Allowing ourselves to be swept along.

This was also rather exquisite.

Around the corner was a parked a white Porsche. It had been a while since I had seen this Porsche model in person… Wait, this car is a two-seater. I could stuff myself in the back, but that is.....

"You, just put Rizumu on your lap."

"....."

What is this person demanding from someone he had just met?

"I don't want to let other people touch the steering wheel... so if you don't want to, hey Rizumu, you can walk....."

"No no no, I don't mind, really."

I hurriedly said, and then I stepped into the Porsche. What's with this person... if Rizumu-chan is strange, then this person seems rather delusional? But then again that's not how he seems... for the most part he seems very logical, but it's difficult to get a feel for what he thinks. Though I will say that a Porsche and a fox mask is quite the fashion statement.

"Eheheh, a human chair!"

Rizumu-chan said as she sat her butt on my thighs.

.....Don't call other people a human chair.

A human chair.

Not an ounce of sexiness.

"I love you!"

"....."

Rizumu-chan smiled.

.....She means no ill-will.

I shut the door.

"…..So, where to, kidnapper?"

"Leaving Shirosaki out east, and then after a bit of a drive, there's a good store. Mountain soba, and the ingredients are all natural produce. It's a store that gives us tangible proof that no matter how much people tinker and try, we can't beat nature."

"Huh. Sounds nice."

"I made a reservation for two, but one more shouldn't be a problem."

"Perhaps. But it's natural produce, right? Then maybe they only have enough for two."

"Then you and Rizumu will split."

"Huh?"

"I'm not splitting."

He proclaimed boldly.

I thought he was treating me…..

Not that it matters, or rather as someone sitting in the passenger seat it does matter because it affects my life, but is he able to see in front of him and the streetlights and other cars with that mask?

"Hahah. Mr. Fox has quite the appetite! Being gluttonous. Wonderful! Mr. Fox, I love you!"

"You're being over-familiar, Rizumu. How many times do I need to tell you to watch your words."

"Ah, yes. I'm sorry," Rizumu-chan looked sad for just a moment. And then the next moment, she turned to me and smiled. "I got yelled at!"

"…..It seems so."

"Yelled at once and smarter once!"

Rizumu-chan wriggled around on my lap. I dared not say it aloud because it was about a girl, but she was pretty heavy. Probably because of the manteau. Probably about 40 kilograms total…..? I looked down a bit and at Rizumu-chan's hair whorl. Her silky black hair looked all the more pretty this close.

And it reminded me.

Of that day, that night.

The moment the great detective transformed into a professional

killer.

"Ah, come to think of it, Onii-san, I heard you met my brother Izumu, is that true?"

".....Yeah."

I nodded.

As for why, because that was the truth. If I'm asked whether the truth is the truth, then I must nod. Anyone would do the same. I would do the same. When I'm feeling good, anyways. Sometimes.

I met Niounomiya Izumu. That was an undeniable truth. However, this was also not the second time I met Rizumu-chan, but rather the third.

"What's wrong, Onii-san? You went all quiet. Ah, did Izumu do something mean to you?"

"Something like that. Your brother, if I may say so, has quite the personality. Has he always been like that?"

"Yup. Since a long time ago."

"You two are... similar."

"Ehh? Not at all."

"Rizumu-chan, you know....."

"If you treasure your tongue, I recommend shutting up."

The fox-masked man butt in.

"We're speeding up."

2

After a long enough drive that I thought we would be leaving Kyoto, I was brought to what you would call a traditional Japanese restaurant. An old-fashioned exterior that seemed exactly what you would expect in Kyoto. And it also matched the fox-masked man's traditional attire, though not so much myself in casual clothing and Rizumu-chan in her manteau.

The room we were led to was almost three times as large as my apartment room and the scrolls and flowers were so splendid that I was sure Miiko-san would go crazy if she were to see them. Though I had never seen Miiko-san go crazy.

Kyoto Kaiseki was brought to us.

Rizumu-chan and I had oolong tea, being underaged, while the fox-masked man had Japanese sake in a rock glass, and we toasted. No one said anything about a toast, but we nevertheless clinked our glasses.

I dampened my lips just a bit on the oolong tea.

"Ugii ugii ugii."

As for who was making the sound of an American bullfrog, it was Rizumu-chan of course. Unable to use her arms, she had clenched the tea glass with her teeth and raised a toast anyways. She almost certainly had enough jaw strength to bite through a mouth gag.

I thought that to myself, as I caressed the cut on my cheek.

Anyways.

I hadn't merely allowed myself to be carried along by this obviously suspicious looking fox-masked man and the great detective side of this two-personality girl wearing a manteau and glasses. I had reason enough, and as for that reason, there were actually two.

First, and this was personally more important, the fox-masked man. How this man intends to eat while wearing the fox mask. Or perhaps, how he intends to drink liquid. It wasn't the type of mask with an open mouth area, so it would surely be impossible to eat and

drink while wearing the mask. I was curious.

.....And.

".....What? Stop sitting there and eat."

He immediately took off his mask and reached out to the meals with his chopsticks. And then he brought the sake to his mouth with a refined motion. He certainly looked the part of an experienced man.

"....."

Well, it was obvious.

It was obvious.

But, no one would suffer if everyone could do the obvious when it was obvious.

"You've been looking like you want to say something, with that puzzled face."

".....You took off your mask."

"Mm. Yeah," the fox-masked man glanced at the mask placed to the side. "I don't know how else to eat."

"....."

Then why were you wearing a mask! I had to restrain myself from asking. That was something that should not be asked, just like Rizumu-chan's manteau. I wanted to avoid delving further.

Incidentally.

The fox-masked man had quite the manliness to him, like aged masculinity. His angry expression was a little... no, I should say it bothered me some, but anyways it helped give him a handsome look. The kimono worked to give him a sort of kabuki actor impression. I didn't think he had a need to hide a face like that behind a mask, but perhaps that was part of the fox-masked man's personal fashion statement.

Either way, it can't be helped.

Let's say one of my reasons has been solved.

Then, the second reason.

"Uhh, um, Rizumu-chan--"

"Shut up," the fox-masked man checked me with an eerily quiet, yet powerful voice. "Don't talk while eating."

"....."

Ehhhh.....

Doesn't that make eating together... pointless?

I looked at Rizumu-chan. She was eating like a dog again, but she was quietly stretching her tongue out to the meals. Quietly, munching.

"....."

When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Don't let us meddle with our betters.

Follow blindly. Opportunism.

Not that it all mattered.

I acquiesced, and quietly reached out to the meal with my chopsticks.

The taste was rather thin, and it wasn't particularly good.

".....I'm just a pleb, after all."

"Mm? Did you say something, Onii-san?"

"Nah, thank you for the meal."

"Hmm."

Having finished his meal, the fox-masked man put his mask back on. As the post-meal tea was brought to us, he finally turned to me and offered, "Now, let's talk. You were about to say something." He remembered.

"Ah, umm... Rizumu-chan. That *mental labor* you mentioned before... were you hired by this person?"

"*Mental labor*?"

"....."

She forgot.

It seemed it wasn't a finishing line or anything, but rather something she came up with on the spot.

"You know, that you were looking for Zerozaki something."

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

The fox-masked man said.

".....You know of Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"Eh? No no, I don't," I hurriedly and flatly denied. "There's no way I would know. Why would I know of someone like that? What proof do you have that I know of an abject human failure like Zerozaki Hitoshiki? That's quite insulting. Really, truly terrible."

"....."

"....."

Huh.

It looks like they're being suspicious!?

"N-no, really, I just thought it was a bit of a strange name. Zerozaki, you know, Zerozaki. And then Hitoshiki. It seems so stupid. Laughable really, it's not every day you run into a masterpiece of a name like that."

".....Hmm."

I couldn't tell what expression the fox-masked man was making, because of his mask, but it didn't seem too difficult to discern the suspicious gaze from behind.

"Well, I'm the one that hired her," the fox-masked man finally said. He said, and at the same time, he chopped Rizumu-chan's head. "And you shouldn't be blabbering to everyone."

"Oh please, Mr. Fox. I wasn't blabbering. I whispered. Whispered."

"Shut up."

She got chopped again.

Rizumu-chan didn't have any means of shielding herself. And furthermore, her head happened to be at just the right level for it to be very easy for the tall fox-masked man.

".....Well, no problem. There's nothing wrong with you having heard about it… not like there's anything to hide. Rizumu. How did the investigation go? I came all the way to Kyoto and even prepared this location today to hear your answer."

"Ah. Umm, yes," Rizumu-chan seemed to straighten up a bit. "In conclusion, the person named Zerozaki Hitoshiki is no longer in Kyoto."

"....."

"Or rather, it seems he was killed."

".....I see."

The fox-masked man seemed to hesitate before nodding.

"That is a shame."

"As expected, or should I say, as Mr. Fox had said, the serial murders that happened here in Kyoto in May... the suspect behind

those murders was without a doubt this Zerozaki person. I was able to find proof. And it seemed he was killed right after."

"....."

"I'll present you with a detailed report later, but most likely, I wasn't able to procure the result that Mr. Fox sought. My condolences."

"..... I see."

Wow.

The police had not issued an official statement of any sort when it came to the May serial murders. I thought it was belated for Rizumu-chan to be investigating Kyoto now, but it seemed it was simply that she began investigations late (she probably began around the end of last month), and it seemed her label as a great detective wasn't a case of pumping up inferior goods with a better name.

Pumping up inferior goods with a better name.

No, perhaps even that was being too harsh.

And, the fox-masked man was looking at me.

".....What is it?"

"No. Nothing."

"Uh huh… and that Zerozaki person, was he a friend?"

"'Was he a friend.' Hmm, I don't know him at all... at all. Never even met him. But, from what I'd heard, he seemed like someone with quite the amusing *destiny*, so I wanted to get in touch with him, but if he's dead, there's nothing to be done. There's no way to deal with someone whose destiny has shut its doors. It seems Zerozaki Hitoshiki's and my destiny were not meant to be intertwined."

"..... I see."

"A shame."

The fox-masked man looked obviously disappointed at Rizumu-chan's report. He was so glum that you could tell even through his mask.

".....Onii-san. Do you know of the Zerozaki Family?"

".....I don't."

I answered carefully.

The fox-masked man looked at me. "Hmm."

"The Zerozaki Family. They're a group of serial killers that can't even become *evil*. An ugly army of which it is taboo to make an enemy of. The worst gathering of which it is taboo to make an ally of. A treasury of wicked blasphemy. They're merely third in name, but they're by far the most reviled among the *Killing Names*."

"....."

The fox-masked man's words sounded like a foreign language to me. It felt like the information only flowed into my head in bits and pieces. And he didn't seem to actually be explaining to me, anyways.

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki was a natural-born child to them. Natural-born, and I mean natural-born to the point of having a birth certificate. He was **a child born from an incestuous relationship within the Zerozaki**. The one inexplicable and impossible exception among a group that doesn't think about keeping things together for the future. An exception, truly an exceptional outlier. You could call him the most serial murderer of serial murderers, the most Zerozaki of the Zerozaki... I really wanted to meet him while he was alive."

"....."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

I reminisced.

The many, pointless conversations we had.

He laughed a lot.

He talked a lot.

And within him.....

I saw a bit of myself.

Though I had to restrain vomiting.

"Hmm."

The fox-masked man said, as if to provide a conclusion.

"In any case, this topic ends here… now, Onii-san. My work here is done and I'm left with free time. So, let's talk."

"Uh huh....."

So he said.

But I also felt like I fulfilled my goals. At the very least, the two reasons for me coming here had been resolved.....

If there's anything else that I would want to ask.

It would be whether the fox-masked man knows about Rizumu-chan's *brother*, Niounomiya Izumu, and that would be about it. However, that topic is rather difficult to ask.....

Especially in front of him.

Well, I'm not exactly in front of him.....

What a pain.

"Ah, then!" Rizumu-chan energetically raised her hand. "Me me me me! I have a question that I would very much like to ask Onii-san!"

".....What is it?"

"I wanted to ask you since the last time we met!"

"So, what is it?"

"What's your relationship with that kind-looking Onee-san?"

"....."

A childish interest.

Then again, I just asked the same.

"Master and maid."

"Hawah!"

Rizumu-chan arched backwards in surprise.

"M-maid! Onii-san was a maid!?"

"Not me."

"Th-then that Onee-san!? That pretty and beautiful Onee-san was a maid!?"

"Yes yes. She was. She takes care of everything around me. Kasugai-san calls me master."

"I think it was Ikki?"

"Not in front of other people, anyways."

"I see. Hmm hmm."

She accepted it.

This girl was fun to trick.

"'Kind-looking Onee-san,'" the fox-masked man said. "So what. You were in the care of someone other than this Onii-san, too?"

"Yes."

".....You shouldn't be bothering people so much. It starts getting troublesome. This Onii-san is alright, but stop creating connections with pointless people."

"Yes sir."

"However... once you create a connection, I guess you can't call it pointless regardless of what destiny it is. Because this Onii-san and that *Onee-san*'s connection **had already been formulated**, you formed that connection with the both of them. In most cases, there's nothing you can do about that."

"....Connection?"

"Yeah, connection."

The fox-masked man seemingly chopped Rizumu-chan's head for no reason, and then turned to me.

"Do you believe in fated meetings?"

"....Huh?"

Those.

Those words.

I feel like I heard them from someone, at some point, at some place.

"For example... right here right now, three people are gathered. Some people might call this a meaningless coincidence, but there's a perspective that **that's not true**."

"....Connection."

"You *helped* Rizumu two weeks ago, and then two weeks later the *fortune* to by *coincidence* meet myself, the client of that Rizumu... that's no longer fortune or coincidence."

"....Are you saying that it's destiny?"

"There's nothing in this world that's meaningless. Everything has some significant meaning to the world. For as long as you're a piece of this worldly construct, you can't escape from the curse of fate. Didn't I tell you earlier? We're allowing ourselves to be swept along by fate. If there's anyone that thinks they have no value, that they're living without any relation with the world, they're past the point of ignorance and into the realm of arrogance."

"....Are you a fatalist?"

"More of a story-ist, I would say. I don't think there's some idiot like a god, but there's definitely a Story to this world. That's why the characters appearing in that Story, the cast of that Story have no

freedom. They have freedom, but that's why they don't have freedom. Just just just, following the Story."

"Following....."

"The three of us met there because we were meant to meet there. That'd be the cliche way to say it."

"....."

For example, if Kunagisa's monthly examination wasn't today.

For example, if Rizumu-chan hadn't gotten lost en route to Shirosaki.

For example, if the fox-masked man had chosen another place to meet.

No, it wasn't necessary for there to be such a big change.

There just needed to be a slight shift.

If I had not spoken to Miiko-san at the parking lot, if I had fulfilled my promise to Hime-chan, or any other such whimsical thing. That was all it would have taken for me to not have met this fox-masked man and to reunite with Rizumu-chan.

The result of such intricate coincidence.

Was it right to say that we met because we were meant to meet?

"Of course, there's some level of limited freedom... like this."

The fox-masked man toppled over a tea cup.

The spilled inside spread over the table.

Slowly, gradually.

".....This unreasonable, pointless, unnatural action can be done. But we can't resist the bigger picture, the Story. We have small freedoms, but not large freedoms. The gigantic freedom is destroyed by smaller freedoms. Like a caged bird. Whatever you do, it gets corrected."

"Corrected....."

A caged bird.

Even if the cast of characters go and act on their own.

The Story itself cannot be changed.

"Yes, corrected. Well, it's too late now so this is juststupid 'what if' theorizing, but if we were to miss each other today, at that place. In that case, you would of course not meet myself nor Rizumu... **or so**

you would think, but that's not how it works."

"Megante....." Rizumu-chan dropped her forehead on the table. "Mr. Fox, I don't know what you're saying. By the way, if you split it in half, Megante sounds like a girl's name."

"As for what happens then."

It was an oppressive and impressive display of ignoring.

"**You and Rizumu and I would meet at a different place, and we would have a similar conversation**. The timeline would shift a bit, but **somewhere sometime**, at a different location and a different hour, we would still partake in this action. I call this phenomenon Back Nozzle. Incidentally, there's no guarantee that Rizumu and I would be together in such a case. You might even meet us one by one."

"....."

"Alternatively, as another possibility, instead of meeting Rizumu and me here, **there was a chance that you would have met another person. Someone with whom you would have had a conversation that provided the same meaning and result**. This wouldn't need to be another human being of my level, or lower or higher, nor would it need to be someone who necessarily must appear again in the story, as long as it's someone who gives you the same meaning as myself. Well, given this level of destiny, probably anyone would do as a substitute. Even when it comes to Rizumu....."

He glances at Rizumu-chan.

".....Even if it were this one's big brother Izumu, your fate probably wouldn't have changed much."

"Izumu....." I couldn't help myself from interjecting. ".....-kun, you say."

"Ah... ah, come to think of it, you did mention in the car that you also met Izumu. Then that's all the more true. If you didn't run into Rizumu here and now, you probably would have met Izumu *somewhere* and *sometime*. That's how it goes. I call this phenomenon Jail Alternative."

Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative.

Even if you procrastinate on something that must be done now,

you still end up having to do it at some point, and if it still must be done now, then someone will end up doing it in your stead.

The system of the world.

That… is almost like.

That is almost like the world has a will of its own. Not at the level that most people think about when referring to gods and *the creator of the world* but… **as if the story itself has a means of ensuring that everything returns to the way it should be**.....

Then how about those that struggle against fate.

Are they erased by fate itself?

Just to tie loose ends.

Natural selection.

Natural selection, with the invisible hand of god.

That phrase fits, if you only take the meaning of the words themselves.

Fitting, fate-wise.

Fitting, destiny-wise.

"This isn't that strange a story, nor that revolutionary a story. 'Molecules formulate into predetermined shapes of atoms.' 'Same atoms all have the same shape.' 'Atoms cannot combine in more ways than have been set.' 'Connections are secured under pre-established rules.'...and then 'the power to return to the way things were is something all things fundamentally have.'"

"All things... then, fate too."

"'All things... then, fate, too.' I guess you could call it fate's automatic recovery system. Or an error correction system. **No matter what you do, it'll be fixed somewhere else in the end**. The balance sheet is closed. Loose ends are tied. It means that the world isn't seeking some absolute revolution. No matter how different the yin, all the way at the end, you will still arrive at the same yang. A preestablished harmony... ah, that's right, I guess the easy way to put it would be that thing. Space Will."

"…..?"

"What, you haven't read Ghost Sweeper Mikami? What were you doing up to that age without reading manga?" the fox-masked man

said with a bored tone. "I can only call it inferior, but how about the Dragonball?"

".....Do you like manga?"

"I love it."

The fox-masked man declared, bluntly.

"If you're not familiar with these words, how about the Akashic records? There's a bit of a disjoint if you think of it that way, but it should help you understand. In other words, fundamentally, it's the work of fools to fight against fate. And to carve your own path? Impossible."

".....That sort… I've never heard such a decisive opinion on the matter before, but I must say, it doesn't seem like a bad opinion."

I didn't have to fudge any thoughts to give that opinion, and from my past experience, there were plenty of parts with which I could agree. I definitely couldn't agree with the notion that there's nothing meaningless in the world, but even that wasn't something I couldn't understand.

Fate is *decided*.

Decided means there's no room for change.

That's not a religious concept, but rather one that was mathematical, statistical, and probabilistic. At the end of the day, human beings only have a select few choices at any given moment.

If that's the case.

If that's the case, it's ridiculous.

If that's the case, it's a masterpiece.

In other words, this me.

Would have ended up being me no matter what happened.

.....That's.

That's nonsense.

"Who the Earth revolves around? That's been set in stone forever. The Earth revolves around the Earth. Those that think the world exists for them and those that think they're useless to the world both are making the same fundamental mistake. Both helpless fools."

".....If I were to pick, I consider myself someone that provides no value to the world," though that would be the case regardless of the

choices. "Then of course you would be the exact opposite, in accepting yourself as a member in the cast of characters, a piece of the world bound by the prison of fate?"

"I don't know about that. I'm a guy that wants to stand outside of that Story. A Story this amusing is much more fun observing from the outside than being a participant."

".....Can you even do that? If your theories are correct, then it would be rather difficult to step out of this story, out of this world."

"Difficult, but not impossible. No, you could say I'm already standing outside--

I've already been exiled from karma.

---the best I can do to participate is to meet with people like Onii-san. I'm half-assed and vague."

"Zzzz, zzzzz, snort."

Rizumu-chan had fallen asleep.

It seems our conversation was boring.

To be honest, this must be one of the most boring conversations to be listening in on. It had gone so far into the conceptual, that even for myself, participating in the conversation, the words of the fox-masked man seemed as hazy and illusory as a dream. You could say I didn't actually understand what he was saying.

However, then why.

Then why does what this person says strike so deep?

Why does it resonate?

Why does this nonsense resonate?

It seemed, right now.

Almost like I was being told an outrageous confession.

Then, no.

I don't want any part of such importance.

I don't want anything to do with the core of the Story.

"Well, that's why I have that great detective or something over there working in my stead and working and such... look at me well, Onii-san. Take a good look at how I am. This is the result of a man

who fought against fate. Aren't I pathetic and downtrodden? Though I admit I like this pathetic-ness and downtrodden-ness myself... losing isn't so bad."

"…..Did you fight against the story in the past? Is that what you mean by being exiled from karma?"

"Pretty much. Because of a slight mishap, I was about to utterly destroy the law of cause and effect, that law that shouldn't really be possible to destroy. The punishment for killing a god has always been exile from paradise. Hmm. In retrospect, that wasn't very thought-out and I'm still dragging it with me, but I don't consider that the folly of youth, because if I didn't do it then, I'd be doing it now. Back Nozzle and all."

"Utterly destroy the law of cause and effect….."

But that would be.

An apple will *fall*, *rain* will *fall*, *the sun* is *bright*, *the night* is *dark*, *you laugh* when you're *having fun*, *you cry* when you're *sad*... you *die* if you're *living*.

A rebellion against causality.

A revolution against the existent destiny.

A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come

Researching not dying.

"Then I suppose Assistant Professor Kigamine's research is also something along those lines….."

"'…..Assistant Professor Kigamine's research is also,'" the fox-masked man caught and repeated my words. "….. Is that what you said, Onii-san?"

"Huh? Umm, yes. I did."

"Kigamine… Kigamine Yaku."

"Yes. Ah, you know of her?"

She must really be famous, then.

Aikawa-san seemed to know of her, too.

"…..W**hat a nostalgic name**. **Come to think of it**, **that was part of the cast of characters back then too**."

"…..?"

"Onii-san. That Kigamine... umm... Assistant Professor. Hmm. Tell me about *Assistant Professor Kigamine's research*."

"Umm."

Even though he's asking.

Am I actually allowed to tell him?

"The Human Biology Department of Takatsu University and, umm, something about researching not dying....."

"'Researching not dying.'"

He repeated like an incantation.

Suddenly, the fox-masked man stood up.

Given his height, when he looked down at me as I sat on the cushion, it felt like I was being looked down upon from heaven.

My body suddenly felt cold.

My heartbeat raced.

"Eh, uh. Yes....."

"....Kigamine is doing something like that... no, maybe... perhaps, *that* was left behind... didn't calculate… no, I just forgot."

The fox-masked man began muttering to himself, barely out of my hearing. He looked completely different from before. He was quite eccentric already, but now it was like, you would say... not so much an eccentric but rather.

A madman.

"Amusing."

The fox-masked man said with a tone that reeked of abject boredom.

Furthermore, he looked both displeased and disturbed.

"You and me's *connection*, it seems to be a very amusing one indeed. How fascinating. I thought *Zerozaki Hitoshiki* was my main goal, but maybe you were the right answer."

"....Huh?"

"Hmm. This average looking ordinary boy that I *just so happened* to encounter in a *no particular place*… that too is quite amusing. Well, it's cruel for both you and me to desire that much. There's no way, would

be the way to put it. I don't think that's possible, but it's correct."

"Uh, umm... Mr. Fox?"

"Wake up, Rizumu."

The fox-masked man kicked Rizumu-chan's ribs with his toes. "Hyan!" Rizumu-chan yelped while waking up.

"Wh- what? Ah, you finished talking!"

"We're going home."

"Eh? B-but, it's still early! I still want to talk to Onii-san! We finally met again!"

"I have business for you and your brother and we're on the clock. We're too short on time. Even if it's a case of Back Nozzle, this should be done as soon as possible. Hurry up."

"……Mmm."

Rizumu-chan looked to be in disagreement, but she didn't argue further. Probably, or rather almost certainly, *brother* was a keyword for the two.

"Put on my manteau please."

"Right."

The sight of the rather haughty fox-masked man helping Rizumu-chan with her manteau was somewhat funny.

"Done."

"Yes. Well then."

Rizumu-chan, now wearing her manteau again, turned to me while sitting, and then saluted.

"Well well well! Onii-san, until another time!"

"…..Yes."

I answered.

"Give Izumu-kun my greetings, too."

"Kay! Farewell!"

Rizumu-chan's smile was blinding.

But her incisors were peeking out from her mouth.

The sharp incisors.

"……"

"Hey, Onii-san."

"Eh, uh, yes."

"Feel free to take your time. I'll finish paying the bill. I'm sorry after inviting you, but as you can see, I can't send you back anymore."

The fox-masked man placed two 10,000 yen bills on the table.

"To pay for a taxi."

Ah, that's right.

I need to go back to Shirosaki to pick up my Vespa.

"…..Thank you for everything."

"'For everything.' Don't worry about it. Well then--"

"--*if we have* a connection, let us meet again."

Rizumu-chan and the fox-masked man left the room.

I remained alone after the shoji was shut.

Three tea cups remained on the table. One was toppled over, with its content spilled out over about half of the table.

But that had nothing to do with the Story.

And fate didn't bother stopping it.

Everything happens as it does.

And only as it must.

Without recourse.

Everything, that way.

"…..Ah."

And that was when I finally came to the realization.

I got it, I got it.

The reason why I had come here.

It wasn't the trivial questions like how he would eat while wearing a mask or because I wanted to ask about Zerozaki. It was a more simple, easy matter.

That unreasonable personality.

That forceful way of talking.

That lack of inhibition for hitting people.

That lack of care for other people's situations.

And that manly face beneath the mask.

And more than anything else, that triumphant, confident look.

"That person was very similar to Aikawa-san….."

3

Midnight.

I headed straight to Hime-chan's room on the first floor after returning to the tatami apartment. Hime-chan sat brawling with the mountain of homework piled on the small glass table that looked totally out of place in a tatami-floored room.

Why does she study?

Because there is a mountain.

".....Yo, Hime-chan."

"....."

She shot me an incredibly resentful look.

I couldn't help from taking a step back.

To be given such a look when I was feeling charitable about helping with homework and such... well, actually it's quite deserved.

".....My bad," I apologized and then I sat at the table to face her. "It's great that you were able to do this much alone. Yes, yes, you did your best, Hime-chan. Good for you and have a pat. I'll do the rest for you, so Hime-chan, go ahead and take a break."

"....."

".....What do you want?"

"....."

"What is it that you wish of me, princess?" I tried acting like an inexplicable character instead of just being polite. "Please, go ahead and scrub the floor with this user of nonsense."

".....No, I'm fine," Hime-chan heaved a non-forgiving sigh. "All is last when given to a fool if you take Master seriously."

"I'm glad you say that."

I would have been happier if she had said all is lost when given to a fool, but I also don't have such high expectations.

"In exchange, please butcher me sometime."

"What.....?"

I would be open to treating her sometime.....

She messed that up, right?

"By the way, Master, where did you go today, anyways?"

"Who knows... I was taken by car, so I don't know for sure, but some traditional restaurant."

"A traditional restaurant!" Hime-chan expressed surprise. "A traditional restaurant, as in a traditional restaurant? The ones that a lot of important people go to for scheming, Master! What scheming eviling have you been up to!?"

"Such prejudice..." Also, evil can't be used that way. "Oh, that reminds me, Hime-chan."

I decided to ask while doing her homework (for 7th graders, and because it was for supplementary lessons, the questions were even easier than you would expect). Yes, Aikawa-san is very sloppy, so it was expected for her to only know the rough details, but perhaps Hime-chan would know more.

"Hime-chan, do you know of a kid named Niounomiya Rizumu?"

".....Niounomiya?"

"Could be Izumu too. Niounomiya Izumu or Niounomiya Rizumu, either of them."

"....." Hime-chan went silent for a moment. "Niounomiya, Yamiguchi, Zerozaki, Susukino, Hakamori, Tenbuki, Ishinagi....."

"Yes?"

Did she say something?

I couldn't hear her well.

Yamiguchi? Ishinagi?

Houko-chan and Moeta-kun?

".....I know them. The Niounomiya siblings, right?"

"Ah, so they're famous," I paused my writing hand. "Aikawa-san seemed to know them too, but for some reason she wasn't very helpful. You know, because of how she is."

"No, they're not famous. It's the opposite if anything, Hime-chan just happens to know of them. The Niounomiya Siblings of Massacre Magic, Izumu the *Man Eater* and Rizumu the *Carnival*. Of course, Hime-chan has never met them, but I've heard about the Massacre Magic of the Niounomiya Troupe from Hagihara-san."

"Hagihara… Shiogi-chan."

The *Strategist* and Sumiyuri Academy student representative, Hagihara Shiogi.

It wasn't so long ago that I could call it a nostalgic name, nor was she someone who I could easily forget, and to be honest, there was nothing about that girl that was worth being nostalgic over.

"Hagihara-san fought the *Niounomiya* once when she was a first-grader. I just heard her talk about that. Otherwise, you'd never know about what's going on in the *Niounomiya* because they don't leak any information. It's pretty rare to find an organization so good at being secretive, both in the underworld and otherwise."

"Hmm....."

"Like *Fragment*, the five-man Niounomiya group. They're a nutty killer with five bodies housing the same single soul. They're a pain, you know? You hafta try to block ten arms with just two."

One soul in five bodies.....

What's that?

For a moment, I thought of the Chiga sisters at Wet Crow's Feather Island. Chiga Akari, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko... no, I think that was just a joke by Teruko-san, or maybe it wasn't.....

".....You can manufacture that?"

"Beats me. But I don't think Hagihara-san would lie like that. The *Niounomiya* are a troupe that do whatever it takes to make methods of murder look like magic. Common sense and bias are both totally pointless with them. That's why they're given the name the Niounomiya Troupe of Massacre Magic. They're all like seasonal articles, even their branches."

"Seasonal articles....."

Sounded like something Hagihara-chan would say.

The straightforward strategist that took advantage of every available fastball and curveball.

"Yes. I didn't find this out from Hagihara-san, but I've heard there's a three-person group in the Troupe that uses a Japanese katana, a naginata, and a bow. Philosophically to come after you from close range, mid-range, and long-range, but like, that's pretty seasonal, too."

"Seasonal."

Which means places like Sumiyuri Academy, not counting *Zig Zag*, and Zerozaki Hitoshiki are in some ways pretty orthodox.

"But, being seasonal and all aside, they're definitely the most powerful group of killers. Jun-san, even that battle-loving *Humanity's Strongest Contractor*, Aikawa Jun, prefers to avoid confrontation with them."

"That much....."

"Yes. And that *Man Eater* Izumu and *Carnival* Rizumu… I'd heard of them from Hagihara-san, just like with *Fragment*."

".....Then you know of *them*. Or rather, of *her* condition."

"Yes. Double personality."

Double personality.

Also known as Dissociative Personality Disorder. There's no need to explain it, as it's commonly used in manga and novels and movies. Kunagisa Tomo would probably think of *Billy Milligan the 24 people*, and Aikawa Jun would probably think of Sensui Shinobu. Though it doesn't matter what you think of.

"I'm the sub if anything and Rizumu is the main. Gyahaha! Guess you could say I'm the body and she's the puppet!"

He, Izumu-kun had explained.

"So does Rizumu-chan know of your existence?"

"Of course she does. Though she doesn't seem to know I'm inside her. That's how they set her memories. Yeeeeees! We talk on the phone sometimes, you know? Sort of like, hello? It's me, Doppio."

"....."

Hmm.

I posed another question to Hime-chan.

"But I still don't understand. What's the benefit of having two minds in a single body? The advantages of having five bodies for one mind makes perfect sense....."

"Umm. The sister's personality, *Carnival*, has no killing powers. And I mean like, none whatsoever.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

Rizumu-chan.

"The *brother* Niounomiya Izumu, *Man Eater,* takes care of all of the massacre work."

Niounomiya Izumu.

Izumu-kun.

"That's all the more confusing. They call themselves a Massacre Magic Troupe, but one of them lacks any killing skills....."

"Umm. It's hard to explain. Master probably won't really get it," Hime-chan crossed her arms. "Even Master should understand why Hanging High School trained young girls as *berserkers*. And so, *sending* in a *little girl* with *no skills for killing* to the target. Do you get what that means?"

".....A spy?"

"More than that. Because she's unconscious about it. She unconsciously gathers information useful for *Man Eater*, and then creates a situation perfect for *Man Eater*. Consciously and subconsciously, she investigates and creates the perfect stage for herself. That's the role of *Carnival*."

"....."

"And, like, as a secondary effect, she probably acts as an emotional stabilizer. *Man Eater* Niounomiya Izumu sounds like he's bonkers, or like his personality is pretty broken."

"I see. Like a radiator."

So more Sharaku Hosuke than Sensui Shinobu.

Speaking of which, when I was ruining a seat over at the ER3 System, I dabbled in psychology a little, but I never actually met someone with Dissociative Personality Disorder. I never imagined that I would run into one like this.

".....I wonder if that was also manufactured."

"Who knows. like I said, there's no way to dig deeper. Death awaits if you go any deeper. Hagihara-san also didn't... well, maybe she didn't tell Hime-chan out of safety concerns," Hime-chan said. "By the way," she looked at me. "What about the Niounomiya siblings, Master?"

"....."

I feel like I should avoid telling her that, actually, Kasugai-san

picked up the little sister last month and then I met the big brother personality and then I met the little sister personality again today.

There's no need to add to her worries.

Hime-chan is different from Aikawa-san.

"Nothing, was just wondering. By the way, how did Hagihara-chan fare when she fought the Nionoumiya Troupe? Did she win? Or did she lose?"

"Hagihara-san doesn't think of things in *wins* and *losses*. Her matches are counted differently. To her, *victory* and *defeat* are simply a step toward the next move."

".....From that perspective, Hime-chan and Aikawa-san were probably not *enemies* to Hagihara-chan."

"Yes. Hagihara-san was like someone endless playing Go against herself. That's why she was tough to approach... other than by Saijou-chan anyways. Though Hagihara-san seemed to be more annoyed by her than anything."

Hime-chan suddenly looked lonely. She tried to look down to hide it, but I caught a glimpse. Nothing could be done about catching a glimpse. I couldn't act like I saw nothing. Please stop. It hurts me to see such a look.

Ah, geez.

This girl makes me want to do something for her.

"Hime-chan, come here."

"Yes?"

"Come here like I asked, here, around the table."

"? What?"

Hime-chan did as I asked.

"Raise your arms."

"Yes."

Hime-chan did as I asked.

"Close your eyes."

"Yes."

Hime-chan did as I asked.

Really, she must learn to be suspicious of people.

And so.

"There!"

I sexually harassed her.

"Yaahh!" she screamed loudly enough to shake the entire apartment as she back stepped away from me in a manner that could only be described as agile. "Wha. Wha-wha-what are you doing! W-where are you touching!"

"Beats me, where did I touch?"

"…..Ugh."

"Hey hey, that sucks, Hime-chan was touched in a place that can hardly be described? What a perverted girl."

"Ugh~, uh, ooooough... egh, ugh."

"……."

I may have gone a little too far.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. All I wanted was to break the mood because Hime-chan was suddenly going into a somber nostalgic mood. It's a misunderstanding. Please don't give me that look, I'm not a pedophile nor underage sex offender.

"Uguh… ugh, Master why are you always so mean to only Hime-chan….."

She was seriously crying.

Tears everywhere.

…..Umm.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

I gave a direct apology.

With no nonsense.

"…..Waaahh."

"But, because it looked like Hime-chan was being nostalgic, it's not something you want to remember much, right? Hanging High School, about Sumiyuri Academy."

"That's right. But, it's not like there was nothing good from there. Like Hagihara-san and Saijou-chan… and."

"……."

And probably.

Sheisei Yuma as well.

"Haha, and you know," Hime-chan wiped her eyes and forced

herself to smile. "It's not like school's much fun now either. All this studying."

"Students are supposed to be studying."

"…..Well, it's like, Master is paying for Hime-chan's tuition, anyways."

"…..That's true."

Aikawa-san was technically Hime-chan's guardian and Aikawa-san was transferring funds into my bank account for her living expenses, but I was the one paying for tuition.

After the incident in June, I had a conversation with Aikawa-san that went like this.

"Ah? Who cares about school."

"It's no good this way. How is Hime-chan going to find a job with that personality? If she has no skills, then she should at least go to university."

"Blah. Look at this guy all stained in social customs. Fine then, you're paying for the tuition."

"Of course!"

Though the last line was a lie.

And then my savings ran dry. I'm slowly recuperating some of that by working as a tutor, but I can't dispute the notion that I put my foot in my mouth.

And you know, I think I suck at using money.

"Do you hate school?"

"Huh?"

"If you don't like studying that much, you can quit. I forced you to go, anyways."

"Ah. No, that's not what I mean," Hime-chan waved her hands around in denial. "I hate studying, but it's fun being with friends and such."

"Well that's good to hear."

"…..And you know," Hime-chan returned to her original seat at the table. "At the end of the day, Hime-chan enjoys living right now. Everyone in the apartment is friendly."

Hime-chan stared at me.

With such innocent eyes.

But that wasn't just innocence.

There were a lot of things, a lot of things that she had to overcome.

And that innocence was a result of it all.

"I like my lifestyle now. Life is fun. That's why I really appreciate everything, Master. Hime-chan is now really, really happy. Life is filled with happiness."

"That's good to hear."

"That's why I'll forgive you for most things," her innocent expression transformed. "But if you do that again, I'll tell Jun-san."

"So you're telling me to die....."

What a terrifying girl.

Is she really appreciative of me.....?

"Ah, that reminds me, Hime-chan," I decided to put energy into changing the subject. "After hearing about Aikawa-san, have you heard of her having a brother?"

"A brother?"

"Yes."

".....As in a family member?"

"Yup. I saw someone that felt a lot like Aikawa-san today. He was wearing an animal mask and he was actually the person I was doing some evil scheming with at the restaurant."

I excluded mentioning Rizumu-chan and explained the conversation that I had with the fox-masked man.

Hime-chan tilted her head to the side.

".....Doesn't sound similar."

"Really?"

"Jun-san would never say something like 'destiny is set.' If anything, she'd say the opposite."

"....."

Carve out your own destiny.

Or something like that.

If anything, Aikawa-san's position is indeed probably more on the side that the fox-masked man laughed at as being foolish.

"Jun-san would snort at such stupidity like the world being a story. She'd say something like 'the story is for you to write for yourself.'"

"That's true, but the nuance was a bit different. Umm, how would I explain it....."

The world has a story.

And each and every person has a meaning.

And there is no meaningless cast member.

However.....

Even if the meaning isn't fulfilled.

The balance is closed somewhere, at the end.

There is a reason for everything in the world, but that's all.

No meaning to success.

No meaning to failure.

The yin may differ, but the yang is the same.

"....Isn't that worse than just talking about destiny normally?" Hime-chan asked. ".....Because… because that doesn't mean that there's a meaning to life or that there's no meaning to life, but that **there's a meaning but regardless of whether you fulfill that meaning, the result is the same** is what he's saying."

"Well, true."

That's true.

There's no need to adhere to destiny.

There's no reason to resist destiny.

Either way,

If it's the same...

Someone will eventually take care of your failure.

Then allowing ourselves to be swept along by destiny is...

Quite a lot to ask for.

Should be a lot to ask for.

"....."

"I've never heard of Jun-san having a big brother or like, Hime-chan's never heard of Jun-san talking about any relatives."

"I see."

"Of course, Jun-san obviously would have parents and could have siblings, but you know despite how she looks, she never talks about the past."

Never talks about the past.

Never talks about her own past.

"That's similar to Master."

"Although I think the reason for that differs completely between myself and Aikawa-san, but I see. Then he's probably not a brother… relative... might also be impossible....."

Then a similar stranger.

That's how things go.

Simple, but probable.

"Mmm… but he was rather suspicious. Suspicious, or more like, asking to be suspected....."

"What's wrong? Does that masked guy bother you that much?" Hime-chan leaned toward me. "Then should Hime-chan go kill him?"

"....."

That was such a… such a nonchalant, nondescript way of posing such a question.

"My fingers are fully healed and I fixed the *weakness* Jun-san taught me, so as long as that masked guy isn't that crazy, he should be easy....."

"Hime-chan!"

I yelled.

That seemed to startle her, because her eyes widened.

"Wh-what? Why're you shouting so loud?"

".....Hime-chan. That… that's not good. That is... that's not needed. For Hime-chan to live on this side now, such words can never be said again."

"Eh... but."

"No buts."

I said.

Even though I'm in no place to say it.

I still must say it.

"You must never again say that you will kill someone. Killing someone is even worse. Otherwise you will lose everything in the life you're enjoying now. Are you not having fun? Are you not enjoying life now? If you're enjoying it, then you must enjoy it."

"....."

"Got it?"

".....Got it," Hime-chan said with a sad look. "I'm sorry. I'll reflect on it."

".....Yes."

If you can apologize there, you're fine.

It's not too late.

Not too late, like it is for me.

Not too late, like it is for me.

It's too late for me.

.....That is also nonsense.

I self-deprecated.

What do I think I'm doing? Really, what do I think I'm doing? Do I think there's any power behind my words, as someone who didn't make it? Who am I to say something like that? There's no point in me saying something, because it's too late for me.

Even though nothing changes in the world.

Carve out my own destiny?

Laughable.

Laughable?

Make me laugh.

Is that not your job?

Because I am a clown.

Hime-chan looked downtrodden and also looked as though she was expecting more. Really… really, I'm poor at dealing with this girl. Truly poor. Why am I having to bother with someone else.

Responsibility.

Obligation.

Something like that.

Something like that?

Was I a good enough person to act for something like that, to work

for something like that? When did I suddenly become such a good person?

I had no idea, really.

Or maybe I'm just acting like I became a good person.

Maybe I'm trying to have Hime-chan do what I wasn't able to do, in my place, before it's too late for her too.

My alternative.

A contracting of my crime.

Yeah, that's exactly right.

I don't want to do anything anymore.

I am, in truth, not good with Hime-chan not because she's similar to Kunagisa. In truth, because of that, I project myself onto her. In a different way from Zerozaki, Hime-chan is very similar to myself.

That is why, Hime-chan.

At least you should live properly, Hime-chan.

Is what I want.

"…..Hime-chan."

"Yes?"

"Be on your best behavior during the aptitude test tomorrow."

"Yes! Leave it to me!"

Hime-chan smiled and answered joyfully.

CHAPTER 4 — OBSERVATIONS (EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT)

KASUGAI KASUGA
ACADEMIC

0

I agree with your opinion.

However, I would rather die than acknowledge your right to that opinion.

1

I saw this reality.

One in which there was myself, sitting alone facing the serial killer that brought fear and confusion to Kyoto during May, though the memory of that incident has become nothing more than a flickering haze to most. Where and when, just blandly and quietly, obsessively and quietly, quickly and quietly, while taking care to keep our sounds muffled from the darkness surrounding us, we talked.

The serial killer asked me.

Have you ever killed someone?

I answered the serial killer.

Please, of course I've never killed someone. Killing someone is preposterous. I've never ever killed someone and I don't ever plan to kill someone. I've held myself in check even when I had the urge, and I will continue to hold myself in check no matter how many emotions sweep over me in the future.

The serial killer forced a laugh at my answer.

Liar.

I'm not lying. I wouldn't lie. I don't lie. Don't act as though I'm the same as you, because we're different. Human beings that kill people are mentally broken. They're abnormal.

What a ridiculous masterpiece. In this world. In this day and age. In this world and in this day and age with so much misfortune and violence and deceit and bloodshed and horror, there's no one that's killed no one.

I thought to myself that I probably actually agreed, but agreeing wouldn't allow the conversation to continue, so I played devil's

advocate and scolded the serial killer.

That is a skewed opinion. What you say is so off-target that it's actually embarrassing to even listen to. This world isn't filled with only misfortune and violence and deceit and bloodshed and horror, there are other things. Plenty of other things. You could say the other things are the majority.

For example.

For example, fortune.

For example.

For example, justice.

For example.

For example, love.

For example.

For example, friendship.

For example.

For example, dreams.

What a masterpiece.

The serial killer narrowed his cat-like eyes.

Splendid, splendid. A masterpiece, no doubt about it, a masterpiece. That foolishness is so satisfactory that it hurts my stomach to listen to. Such things don't exist, such places don't exist, such times don't exist, they're all just fakes that look like mirages. They're all so phony it makes me puke. Fortune's just decorated misfortune and justice is another word for violence and love is a byproduct of deceit and friendship is just a reflection of bloodshed and dreams are the prologue to horror. Fate and destiny and karma and inevitability are all just destructive fairy tales for massacring hope. There's not a penny of value in just living in this world. There's no point in living. They say if something can go wrong, it will, and that's just how life is, full of despair. Worms and spiders and pond skaters all die too, rotting corpses all of them. What comes of living? Murder is everything. Having to kill. If there's someone in front of you, kill them, and if they're behind you, kill them. If they're not near you, find them and kill them. Kill and be killed and eat each other.

I cannot imagine that you're saying that seriously. You'll probably

say something different tomorrow. Murder is for living. Murder is meaningless. Murder is art. Murder is space itself. As if you're colored like a rainbow, you'll find another meaning in the same action. Because you're like the manifestation of whim. The same way I also am like the manifestation of whim. However, you have nothing acting as a restraint, including these words of mine, and as such, you're much too free.

And you, because of all that, are much too un-free. You're right, of course it's all a joke. As much of a joke as your existence. Good grief, you're miraculously un-free.

The serial killer joked.

But I don't think you're being serious, either. You're a big liar and you say anything but the truth. Because you don't look in the least like you're fond of humans. Not that you dislike them either. You hate them.

Not at all. There are plenty of humans I like. Movies filmed by humans, music composed by humans, art drawn by humans, cooking perfected by humans, cars and planes engineered by humans, academics studied by humans, stories penned by humans, they're all fantastic things.

You just like movies and music and art and cooking and cars and planes and academics and stories. That you like movies and music and art and cooking and cars and planes and academics and stories indicates how little you think of humans. How you just think of humans as a petty machination to create culture and arts. That perspective is broken.

Broken?

Defective.

I think that's saying too much. You act like I'm mad.

Then do you like humans?

.....

I like humans.

The serial killer said with a grin.

I solemnly asked.

Then why do you kill humans?

The serial killer solemnly answered.

Who knows? I don't care, and I don't care to know. It doesn't matter to me one bit who and how many I kill. It's all someone else's business. Murder has nothing to do with me.

Then why do you say you like humans?

The serial killer answered with the same manner of speech.

I like humans. I like humans. I love humans. I need to keep saying that. Regardless of the truth, regardless of what the truth is, I need to keep saying that. Because if I don't, I'll probably start to dislike humans.

Dislike humans.

If I don't, I'll probably hate humans. That, I'd rather avoid. If I don't put in the effort to like humans, if someone I actually like shows up, I'll probably kill them.

.....

You don't think I can change.

.....

Don't you want to change?

And with those words, I fell asleep, and returned to my dreams.

And then.

And then August 15th, on a Monday, as well as the World War II Memorial Day.

Four o'clock in the evening.

We were getting ready to leave on the Fiat 500 I was borrowing from Miiko-san after Hime-chan had returned from her battlefield (school).

"Hime-chan, you don't need to change."

"Oyo. How come?"

"Students tend to do better in interviews while wearing their school uniform."

"I see."

"It's the same in the sex industry."

"Shut up, Kasugai."

I said without honorifics, as the three of us gathered.

Myself, Kasugai Kasuga, and Yukariki Ichihime.

"And I must say that I absolutely don't want to be sitting in the tiny backseat."

"You and your princess-like demands again....."

"That's okay, Hime-chan is small."

"Then I'll take the passenger seat."

After everyone got in, I made sure the doors were shut, and fastened my seatbelt. Turned the key, and off we went.

Our destination: Assistant Professor Kigamine's personal laboratory.

A few hours from the antique apartment is what I had been told, but you could never know for sure until after the first trip. Well, even if the trip were to take five hours, things would surely not be boring with this group.

".....Are you reminiscing?"

Kasugai-san said, suddenly and without warning. Well, not that this was anything new for this person. Suddenly and without any context was neutral for her, the usual.

"About what?"

"Last month. Sort of deja vu?"

".....Heading to a laboratory in a Fiat... I suppose it's a similar premise," I carefully chose my words. "But that sort of happening is impossible. Assistant Professor Kigamine isn't undertaking preposterous research like Professor Kyouichirou."

"Researching not dying, was it? You could fold preposterous three times over. Though you could also say that it's rather hysterical."

"But this time we're just working part-time, and we're not going there to help someone. And the group we're going with....."

Last time, I went with Kunagisa Tomo and Suzunashi Neon. I glanced at the passenger seat and at the rear seat through the back mirror and slowly nodded.

Kasugai Kasuga is on our side.

That spoke for itself.

"We should be alright with this group."

"Hmm."

"I mean, this personal laboratory isn't supposed to be as stupidly large as that one, anyways. Something like it was converted from a clinic that an old acquaintance had been running, so it's like a slightly bigger single door house. I would call it less of a laboratory and more of a lab room? Though I don't understand how you people decide on that."

"Uh huh."

Kasugai-san shrugged.

"That's true, that's true. Even if they're similar it's like comparing a Fiat 500 to a Subaru 360....."

"That's completely different!" I couldn't help but shout. "And stop calling it a Fiat 500! Are you making fun of me, are you declaring war on me, Kasugai-san!?"

"....I'm sorry."

She apologized.

I got too heated.

".....And you know, if you want to go there, it's like the difference between the north pole and the south pole....."

In other words, on the surface they seem like similar things, and if you look at them from afar with subjectivity, there are no significant differences between the two, but as someone acquainted with both, they're completely and fundamentally different.

"Master," Hime-chan's voice came from the rear seat. "Hime-chan is in a tired mode, so may I sleep?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes. Sleep, sleep."

"Thanks."

"Sorry, I know you're tired from school."

"No, no. Hime-chan was just thinking of working part-time anyways. Master's invitation was like a delivery by a stork."

"A delivery by a carrier pigeon."

Kasugai-san corrected her so quickly I couldn't even react. I didn't think she had that capability.....

And not a shabby one, at that.

"It's after class, so I can finally get some crush-eye."

"You're right. Exactly."

Kasugai-san nodded.

No, wait. You should be correcting her there too.

That is so scary.

"Don't worry. No matter what happens, Hime-chan will protect Master's body," and then Hime-chan closed her eyes. "Good night."

And then she lied down on her side of the seat. I worried that her uniform would get creases for a moment, but I suppose that's what you would call being over-protective.

"What a good girl."

Kasugai-san teased.

"…..Well, yes."

"What a good girl. Why is Ichihime-chan such a good girl," Kasugai-san continued. "I wonder what reason there might be."

"……." What are you trying to say? This person has a tendency to hold back. "Um… I'm driving, so could you not speak to me that much?"

"A good human being. In many cases, *virtuous* human beings are often generally deliberately *virtuous*. A lot of them are good human beings." Kasugai-san continued, as if my words were such a passing wind that they were not worth lending an ear to. "In many cases, good human beings that come naturally are just pure evil. Exactly like Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke last month."

"Please, spare me the talk of Utsurigi-san," I seriously uttered. "That person is seriously traumatizing. He shows up in my dreams sometimes. It's still mind-boggling that Kunagisa commanded eight people like that."

"Commanded."

"? What?"

"Commanded is a good word. Maybe the best of words, and no good word ever dies."

"…..So what?"

"Nothing," Kasugai-san said and then she closed her eyes. "I shall sleep as well."

"…..Alright then."

Is your brain running at 41 degrees Celsius?

Why do you always sound like you have a point?

It's awkward driving with your passenger seat being slept in, but it sounds better than having snide remarks all along.

"I'll wake you up if anything happens."

"Don't."

She ordered.

"If you wake this Kasugai Kasuga up, bad things will happen."

"Bad things....."

"Zzzzzz."

She slept.

Despite what she said, it's beyond impossible for me to do something as artistic as waking up someone who is not asleep. I'm not some elder sage.

I decided to focus on driving. Plenty of fuel in the tank. Miiko-san must have refilled it today. Really, that person takes care of me much too well.

"Inoji," Miiko-san said when she handed me the key to the Fiat. "I don't know why, but I have a really bad feeling."

"A bad feeling?"

"Well, you'll probably be fine regardless of how much I worry," Miiko-san said. "But even so, I think you should take the utmost caution."

"Uh huh....."

"That said, researching not dying sounds good." Miiko-san smiled with just her lips. "In swordsmanship, we only have the one getting stronger thing."

"There's nothing wrong with that, though."

"What is necessary for living?"

"Huh?"

"What is necessary for living?"

'Ummmmm.....?'

"To live, you must stay alive," Miiko-san seemed to say without emotion. "That's why, try hard to stay alive."

"Uh huh."

"Stay alive, and come home."

I nodded, but I didn't nod because I understood what Miiko-san was trying to say. I just felt the need to nod. There are not many that would surpass me at sensing these sorts of needs.

Incidentally, today, on the 15th of August, Miiko-san still couldn't find work and seemed to have resigned when it came to the scroll. If Miiko-san were to give up, my plans would also require changes, so I'll probably need to come up with something... but what to do.

After traveling east on Imadegawa, I turned north again on the intersection with Kamogawa. All that was left was to drive north for a while.

Kasugai-san and Hime-chan were both fast asleep.

Completely defenseless.

I personally absolutely detest showing other people my sleeping self and that largely held true even for humans I knew. That was why I had some level of sleep deprivation over the three weeks since Kasugai-san had rolled into my room.

Not that sleep deprivation is a problem.

But do these two not have that concern?

Sometimes, I do think.

That I do overthink a lot of things, and that I am excessively self-conscious and paranoid, and that perhaps, if I could take things less seriously, that maybe I could live with less worries.

As they say, choose not your friends, but your enemies.

Well, that can be called miraculous.

Or perhaps curious.

But despite all that's said and done, if you believed every person you met, you would also eventually have the rug pulled out from under your feet by someone somewhere. I wouldn't need to worry about such things if the world were truly filled with virtuous people.

And I wouldn't have become this sort of human being.

And something like myself wouldn't exist.

Ah, or perhaps.

Sometime, somewhere, definitely.
If you want to call that destiny or inevitability or karma or fate.
If that truly cannot be escaped from...

".....Maybe it is nonsense."
I didn’t have much confidence in my usual line.
Which was, of course, nonsense.

2

It was exactly an hour later that we arrived at the place specified by Assistant Professor Kigamine. Five o'clock in the evening. It was a pretty good time given the Fiat's horsepower. Five in the evening, the sky was still bright. I thought about what time it might be when we'd get home after going through the test. Hime-chan still had class tomorrow, so it'd be preferable not to be too late.

Saitou Clinic.

Read a small sign. Kigamine had told me to use that as a landmark, but that sign seemed to be very old and it was both difficult to read and on the verge of crumbling. Probably, or rather, certainly, that must be a remnant of when this place functioned as a clinic. Though when it comes to the word *remnant*, I think of it as a word that unconditionally strikes at your sense of nostalgia, so I don't like it much. When I came closer to the gate, I found a piece of vinyl tape posted on the mailbox with small text printed on it reading *Takatsu University Research Center* as if it were just to cover one's ass. It felt extremely cheaply done. Or perhaps you could call it perfunctory. I could imagine some people mistakenly coming here for medical care.

However, once you got past the gate, what awaited you was quite the building indeed. Two stories, like an above average sized single family home. It was built with wood, not concrete. Assistant Professor Kigamine had used the word *reconstructed*, but you could also simply say that this was preserved well. It was probably the inside that had been repaired.

I passed under the gate and into the parking lot.

She had said to take the right, but because I'm ambidextrous, I'm actually poor at remembering left and right. For someone ambidextrous, the rare occasion in one's daily life that one must distinguish between left and right was a defect that couldn't be avoided. I thought a little about how it must feel to be left handed.

The parking lot wasn't that spacious, fitting four or five cars at most. And in that not-very-spacious lot was parked a Katana and a Z.

Prior visitors... or rather, one probably belonged to Kigamine. Yet assuming that's the case, what about the other? And they drove a type of vehicle, whether it be the Katana or the Z, that you didn't see very often.

Well, not that it matters to me.

I backed the Fiat into a parking space.

Kasugai-san and Hime-chan remained asleep.

"....."

After pondering it for a moment, I sounded the horn.

Both of them jumped awake.

".....Master....."

I was given a grudge-filled look.

".....Purple mirror purple mirror purple mirror...."

I was being cursed.

Wait, was that what she meant by bad things?

Granted, I am turning twenty next year.

"Let's go. Grab your bags. Hurry up and get off."

"Yes yes....." "Mmkay."

I locked the doors and then turned to the front entrance. As they followed, Kasugai-san stared at the building and Hime-chan glanced every which way.

The front door opened sideways.

It also had an intercom, so I pressed it.

After a moment, a voice came from the speaker.

"Hello."

Assistant Professor Kigamine's voice.

"It's me."

"Yes?"

"Umm... I'm here, as promised."

"Ah... I had already predicted beforehand that you would be arriving just about now."

"....."

Come on, you definitely didn't know who I was just now.

You're definitely just saying that for the sake of it.

"Well, please wait a moment."

Click, I heard her hang up.

We were left with a meaningless silence.

".....Not that it matters, but this is very analog architecture," Kasugai-san said behind me. "Not digital in the slightest. I feel like there must've been a little more care taken for facilities and equipment....."

"I really think you should stop comparing everything to Professor Kyouichirou's laboratory," I turned to Kasugai-san. "Everyone and everywhere doesn't have the luxury of the backing of the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"That's not what I meant. There's... something strange here."

"Something strange?"

"Don't you feel anything, Hime-chan?"

Kasugai-san asked Hime-chan, who looked startled before pondering for a moment.

"Nothing strange especially."

"Really?"

"It's Master after all, I thought we'd be pulled into another weird problem, so I'm a bit bummed. I don't see any traps."

"Traps....."

Or rather, I had no idea that was what she was doing. That must be why she was glancing every which way.

Old habits die hard, it seems.

"After all, I'm Master's bodyguard this time."

"You don't need to be so amped up...."

Well, Aikawa-san had called upon her directly, so I can understand why she wants to put so much effort into it. Anyways, I wonder what Aikawa-san's *bad feeling* meant. Even if unintentional, she had used the same words as Miiko-san.....

Kigamine Yaku.

Aikawa-san reacted to that name.

The same way as the fox-masked man.

"....."

I see.....

Should I be wary of them, too?

If we have a connection.

And if we did not, that was all.

However, is that even possible.....

Is such a happening even possible in my life?

Is such a Story even possible in this world?

I don't know.

I don't know even if I'm supposed to know.

Impossible to calculate.

Impossible to calculate even if there is a conspiracy.

Rumble rumble rumble.....

The door opened sideways.

I had gone ahead and assumed that Assistant Professor Kigamine would show up there.

But a young girl appeared, instead.

Probably around high school age.

Long, black hair, with a light blue blazer and necktie. Was this a uniform for a high school... I couldn't tell. She had an appearance that would be described more as beautiful than cute, more woman than girl despite her age, with somewhat drooping sanpaku eyes.

".....Welcome."

The girl opened her mouth.

There was a lack of energy to her speech, like flat soda.

"I've been waiting. Please, come in."

".....Ah, yes."

For some reason, I was overawed by her.

She quickly returned indoors and I hurriedly took off my shoes. Kasugai-san and Hime-chan likewise entered the foyer and took off their shoes. The girl prepared slippers for the three of us and then motioned, "this way."

The girl slid open a sliding door after we walked down the hallway for a bit and then she shut it behind us. We stepped into a Japanese style room complete with tatami. It reminded me of the restaurant from yesterday, but of course, it was much smaller in scale

and bland without any decorations. You could say it felt very old. The girl deftly prepared enough cushions for us all.

"I'll go get some tea. Please make yourselves at home."

With that, she exited out into the hallway, closing the sliding door behind her without a sound. We put down our belongings and then sat on the cushions.

"Who was that?"

Kasugai-san asked.

".....Um, I don't know....."

She couldn't be a university student at that age... wait, did Takatsu have any restrictions for skipping grades? She could be someone like Kokoromi-sensei... wait, wait, she was totally wearing a blazer.

"I wonder if she's Assistant Professor Kigamine's daughter."

"She has one?"

"Who knows....."

But Assistant Professor Kigamine didn't seem to be at the age to have a child of that age, yet she didn't look like a sibling. Plus, they looked nothing alike. I thought of asking Hime-chan for her opinion, but she was busy struggling with getting into a proper seiza posture. I praised her for her effort, but I told her, "you can sit normally, Hime-chan."

The girl came back quickly.

To be honest, I had gone ahead and assumed we would simply be getting green tea in some mugs, but she instead placed good smelling black tea in elegant teacups that looked like they belonged on a proper wooden tea table.

"Sensei is attending to another guest right now. I'm sorry, but could you wait a few minutes here?"

"Ah, no problem."

Another guest.....?

Probably the Katana or the Z in the parking lot.

I see, that makes sense.

"I'm Madoka Kuchiha."

The girl introduced herself, bowing her head.

".....You could say that I live here."

"You live here?"

Kasugai-san asked back.

"Yes... sensei only comes here to do lab work," the girl, Kuchiha-chan answered. "What would you call it… pretend caretaking? Because houses wear down when no one lives in them."

She referred to the assistant professor as sensei.

"So... what is your relationship with the assistant professor....."

"Do you people,"

Kuchiha-chan mostly forcefully ignored my question and instead asked back.

"Understand what this place is for?"

"....."

"Understand what they do here?"

"Umm....."

"I heard it was *researching not dying*," Kasugai-san answered. She was surprisingly well behaved given that she was speaking to a younger girl. "I'm a zoologist, a biologist. I came because I was intrigued."

".....Hmm. A biologist," Kuchiha-chan seemed observant as she looked over Kasugai-san, then Hime-chan, and finally me. "And... a university student and a high school girl... a strange group. A university student... well, not that it matters."

Saying that, Kuchiha-chan wrapped her long hair around her finger. She wasn't very well behaved. It was as if we were no longer of interest.

"Can I ask a question?"

Said Kasugai-san to Kuchiha-chan.

The tone was as polite as ever.

"Go ahead." Kuchiha-chan nodded.

"Are you going to school?"

"That's a very roundabout question."

Kuchiha-chan laughed out loud provocatively.

If it were to me or to Hime-chan it'd be fine, but it seemed quite rude towards the older Kasugai-san. Rather than the arrogance peculiar to a girl, Kuchiha-chan's attitude was more twisted or faded,

as if making fun of the world itself.

"That's the face of someone that really wants to ask something else. Well, I don't really care either way, but… I don't go to school because I don't have to go. Are you satisfied with this answer?"

"……Yes," Kasugai didn't change her attitude towards Kuchiha-chan, but only nodded at the answer. "Thank you very much."

"Kasugai-san?" I asked Kasugai-san in a whisper so that it didn't reach Kuchiha-chan. "What's wrong? Something has been strange since a while ago."

"...I wonder what it is," Kasugai said something vaguely. "Somehow."

"What?"

"I don't know what it is."

"It's very uncomfortable to hear a secret story being told in front of me,"

Kuchiha-chan said with a relentless tone.

"Can you do it somewhere else?"

"...Sorry," I apologized. "I apologize if you're offended."

"You."

"Eh?"

"You caught the interest of sensei." Kuchiha-chan's eyes seemed to blame me as she looked here, without an ounce of reluctance. "...The other two are extras, huh… she certainly looks like a doctor. I wonder if it's the appearance. Hey you."

"……What is it?"

"I know your eyes very well. Those eyes that don't think of anyone else. Disgusting eyes. Truly disgusting eyes." Kuchiha-chan smiled and mocked. "Eyes that don't put others in their calculations from the beginning, eyes that perceive them as an element of the scenery. More background than scenery. You don't acknowledge the will of others."

"That is…"

No matter what, at the first meeting, there's no reason to be told that by a younger girl. If Kasugai-san and Hime-chan weren't watching, even I would be saying offensive words.

"Others are replaceable for you. Everything is everything's

alternative. For example, if those two were different characters, it wouldn't be a problem for you. Did I guess right?"

"You really are just saying whatever you want… I don't think about humans like I'm in edit mode."

"**You're similar**," Kuchiha-chan said in a mocking tone. "I see. Thats why… that's why you caught sensei's interest. But although similar… it's a terribly extreme form. The ultimate distortion, that's quite severely farfetched. You could even say it's warped."

"Ah, you, you've got a very big attitude, but you know---"

"Shut up."

Kuchiha firmly commanded me.

I was being controlled, damn it.

"Sensei will soon be here."

"Eh…?"

Immediately after Kuchiha-chan said that, the sliding door really moved.

Behind the sliding door was Assistant Professor Kigamine.

And Niounomiya Rizumu-chan.

"Sorry I made you wait,"

Assistant Professor Kigamine said to us.

"I'm sorry, despite having called you."

"Ah, no…"

Naturally, I had forgotten the conversation so far, and my eyes were fixed on Rizumu-chan. Kasugai-san was the same. Hime-chan… didn't know the appearance of Rizumu-chan. She didn't know the black hair, glasses, manteau, or the straight-jacket underneath.

Kigamine-san noticed our gazes.

"Oh, this is a graduate student at Rokumeikan University, Yukimura Touka-san."

"Ah. Aaaaaaaah!" Rizumu-chan raised her voice.

Stupid! This girl is an idiot!

In a quick decision, Kasugai-san and I suppressed our surprise and pretended to not know her, but this girl was!

Assistant Professor Kigamine, Hime-chan, and also Kuchiha-chan

looked suspiciously at Yukimura Touka, aka Niounomiya Rizumu. It seemed that even Rizumu-chan had understood. "Ah, aah, aaaaaah, aaaa..." and she was lost.

So, how will you dodge this.

How will you respond to this crisis, *Carnival*!

"...iuoe, just joking!"

It was the worst possible response.

"....." "....." "....." "....."

"....." "....." "....." "....."

"....." "....." "....." "....."

Silence mixed.

Ahem, Assistant Professor Kigamine coughed out.

"This is a graduate student from Rokumeikan University, Yukimura Touko-san."

Indeed, as expected of a faculty member at a national university, she dealt well with the strange behavior of the eccentric. Gracefully, she cancelled the time that had stopped.

"Just like you, she came to take the aptitude test as a monitor."

"...I see." I listened to the words of Assistant Professor Kigamine while being careful to not act unnaturally. "Weren't the monitors just us? It felt like you said that."

"Yeah, that's right… but, well, this girl is a special case," said Assistant Professor Kigamine in a somewhat poorly pronounced way. "I apologize for doing what I did. It was a sudden decision, but there isn't any problem, is there? I just thought I should have one more monitor."

"Sure, it's no problem for me, so I don't mind……."

"Yu-yu-yu-yu-yu-Yukimura Touko," Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu said with a shaky voice that still couldn't hide her surprise. "Ni-nice to meet you!"

"...Yeah. Likewise."

"Now… Kuchiha."

Assistant Professor Kigamine talked to Kuchiha-chan. Hearing that, Kuchiha-chan answered "yes" and stood up quietly.

"What is it, sensei?"

"Help me with the preparations. Could you guys wait here for a little longer? We're going to prepare for the exam there."

"I understand," I answered.

"Yukimura-san, you too, stay here."

"Y-yes."

Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu nodded and sat down in the place where Kuchiha was sitting before.

"Then, this preparation should be done in about ten minutes."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said so, and Kuchiha-chan, saying nothing, passed to the other side of the doorstep and closed the sliding doors silently.

Hmm….

In the end, it was the same impression I had when we met before. Assistant Professor Kigamine, a person like a robot. It was like she was just repeating preprogrammed dialogue. Of course that wasn't true, but the fact that she gave other people such an impression explained her personality to some extent. Counting the conversation we had on the phone, this was only our fourth contact, but each time that impression just deepened.

So, the four people remaining.

"....." (Me)

"....." (Kasugai-san)

"....." (Rizumu-chan)

"....." (Me)

"....." (Kasugai-san)

"....." (Rizumu-chan)

I guess I'll feign ignorance.

"Yukimura… Touko-san, is it?"

"Y-yes!" Yukimura Touko, aka Niounomiya Rizumu, or rather, Rizumu-chan answered. "Yukimura Touko!"

I see.

She intends to feign ignorance.

It’s the kind of guts that I can respect, so let’s buy it.

Buy and resell immediately.

I’m the kind of guy who resells sold fights.

"You being a graduate student means that you’re older than me."

"Yes! Of course!"

"How old are you?"

"22 years old!"

"You don’t look like it"

"Because I’m dressing younger than my age!"

"I see."

"Because you’re a lolicon!"

"....."

It seems she doesn’t know the meaning of those words.

A little embarrassing.

"Yukimura…" I said as I plotted a little scheme. "If your last name has been Yukimura since you were born, then naturally you’d be able to name all of the Sanada Ten Braves."

"What, what?"

"Incidentally, I can. Saizou, Sasuke, Anayama Kosuke. The priests Miyoshi Seikai and Isa, Mochizuki Rokuro and Unno Rokuro, Nezu Jinpachi and Kakei Juuzo."

"Hyann!"

Rizumu-chan looked as frightened as a culprit who just had their decisive mistake revealed by a great detective.

"...Huh. But Onii-san, you only mentioned nine names, right?"

"Eh?"

"Who’s the last person?"

"....."

It’s not Youaltepuztli… is it?

I think it was a name like the great detective Masafumi.

"...Foolish girl. You forgot to count Sanada Yukimura himself."

"Wh-what! That’s right! What a simple trick!"

This time she seemed surprised, like a police chief that was being played with by the thief.

I mean, aren’t you a great detective?

"....Sorry, I'm gonna go out for a bit." I got up, grabbing Rizumu's manteau and lifting her up like a cat, forcing her to stand, and told Kasugai-san and Hime-chan. "If Assistant Professor Kigamine comes back, please make her wait. I'm counting on you."

"Roger. Have a good trip."

"Master, do you know that person?"

Kasugai-san skillfully tried to look the other way, but Hime-chan attacked sharply. As expected, Hime-chan isn't just a dumb girl. I replied to Hime-chan.

"Well, something like that. I have a bit of… a connection with Yukimura-san." I made eye contact with Kasugai-san. "Right, Kasugai-san?"

"Huh. Oh, I see."

She acted like an outsider.

"I didn't know at all."

"Is that so....."

"After all, I didn't know about this perfect blend of crisp, refreshing, clear, crisp, crisp, clear, crisp, clear, moist, and refreshing."

"Is that so……..."

Traitor.

I'll call you Judas Kasugai.

"Anyway, Yukimura-san? Please come this way."

"Y-yes."

I dragged Rizumu-chan out into the corridor, went back the way we were guided by Kuchiha-chan, and then got out of the building.

We moved to the parking lot.

When I arrived in front of the Fiat, I turned around towards Rizumu-chan, who came quietly from behind.

"....What are you doing?"

"Um... detective activity?"

Rizumu answered me with a cute smile.

Ah, really cute.

"Great detective activity?"

"Don't correct yourself."

"Hiyan…." Rizumu-chan looked up at me, shaking like some

pathetic prey hunted down by a predator. Apparently, I looked like a bad guy. "I was just asked to by Mr. Fox."

"Mr. Fox…."

The fox-masked man.

That person?

Certainly, yesterday he apparently had an extraordinary interest in the name of Assistant Professor Kigamine. Yeah, now that I think of it, I didn't mention at the time that I was going to work here. So, I wonder if Rizumu-chan was surprised earlier.

"....After finishing your search for someone, you took a new job?

"That's right." Rizumu-chan smiled and answered. "Go infiltrate this laboratory, he said……"

"Infiltration… investigation…."

Becoming a Rokumeikan graduate as a means. Really, that's quite something. Someone probably asked an important person from Rokumeikan to write a letter of introduction. Well, she calls herself a great detective, so she must have at least that level of influence… Even so, that was only a story from yesterday. No matter what, it's too fast.

No. Wait, wait.

That's not it.

This girl's claim of being a *great detective* is no more than a disguise, and lurking behind it is....

Man Eater.

I stepped back unconsciously, one step away from Rizumu-chan. In response, Rizumu-chan tilted her head, "Hiyan?"

Rizumu-chan doesn't know.

What is lurking inside her.

That is the meaning of *puppet*.

"When Mr. Fox heard about Onii-san's story, I don't really know why, but he seemed to be intrigued. Conveniently, I was looking for a part-time job, so I barely managed to fit in, but I guess that was unreasonable. And to think that Onii-san was here... I might be tied to Onii-san with an invisible thread."

"Are you connected via electromagnetic waves or something.. so,

where are you sleeping now?" If I remember correctly, this area isn't her hometown. "Still living in a hotel?"

"No. My work has been extended, so I went to a certain place with Mr. Fox yesterday. He'll be taking care of me for a while. Hehe, the boss is harsh. But at the hotel, it costs money."

"Being a great detective is quite the plain job."

"If you say so…."

Rizumu smiled bitterly.

This seems to be a critical point.

"To begin with, what's with Yukimura Touko?"

"It's a pseudonym. It's a good name, right?"

"Hmm. The name is about summer and winter. It's a name that makes you think of an inconsequential character, so it seems to be appropriate for a pseudonym… I don't know why, but there's that nuance."

"That's why, please stay silent, Onii-san."

"....."

"It's between Onii-san and me, right, right!"

"What kind of relationship is that….."

Well, it's obviously better to stay silent. It wouldn't be good to say that there's a professional killer of the *Niounomiya* within such a short distance and alert Hime-chan. That girl, it's not too late for her yet, but it's not that stable and safe. In that sense, she's a dangerous bodyguard for me. But… it's fine if she's really working as a *detective*, but if it's the *opposite*, I can't really keep it from Hime-chan. Even if I keep it quiet from Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, what should I do? Maybe tonight, after returning to the apartment, I should consult with her.

"Well, it's okay to stay silent."

"Thank you! Onii-san, I love you!"

"But there's a condition."

"Lewd stuff is forbidden!"

"....."

Your outfit is far from sexually appealing.

"That's not it….."

"Mm. I understand. Be gentle."

Rizumu closed her eyes gently.

I hit her.

"It hurts!" Rizumu shouted. "Wha-what are you doing! I told you to be gentle! It's really scary to be hit when your eyes are closed, you know!"

"You're noisy."

This month, it's only been this type of person.

I told Rizumu, "you know," and then after a short pause.

"The condition is that, after this interview, starting from the 22nd for a period of a week, I'll be working with you, but if you're going to do **something**, I want you to do it after that."

"What?"

"Otherwise, I won't get paid for the job."

"Hah… then that means I can do what I like after that."

"That's it"

"Cheapskate!"

"Honestly, it's not like I'm not interested in *researching not dying*, but certainly for me now, money is more important, okay?"

"Yes, understood." Rizumu smiled. "Then it's a pinky promise!"

"....."

How?

Should I ask?

It may not be unnatural to ask now, but……

That straightjacket under the manteau.

".....Hmm? Rizumu-chan. Then which one is it?" I pointed at the Katana and the Z. "Rizumu-chan's?"

"Yay! Katana! I love it!"

"Hmm."

Is this also something borrowed from the fox-masked man? Rizumu-chan doesn't seem like she's been just walking everywhere.

"I really love motorcycles!"

"Hmm."

"Speaking of which, motorcycles are called autobikes, but what is a manual bike?"

"....I guess it would be a bicycle." I replied without confidence. I never thought about that. "Do you have a license, Rizumu-chan?"

"Oh my, Onii-san. What are you talking about? I'm 16 years old!"

"....."

This Katana is a rather large motorcycle.

Ah… no, wait, wait, that's not the point!

How did she drive with the straitjacket!

"Ri-Rizumu-cha--"

"Let's go back! Before the professor comes!"

"Not a professor but an assistant professor… no, wait....."

Professor, assistant professor; police inspector, assistant inspector. While doing the usual exchange, we went back inside the building. We walked down the corridor and returned to the Japanese style room. Neither Assistant Professor Kigamine nor Kuchiha-chan were there yet.

"I'm back."

"Welcome back." "Welcome back."

Hime-chan and Kasugai-san were side by side on a tatami mat, lying on a pillow they used as a cushion.

Even though nobody was watching, this boldness….

It's not common.

"Master. What did you talk about?"

"Not much. I just heard from Yukimura-san about the electrodynamics of a moving object."

"Really..." Hime-chan was impressed.

"Really!?" Rizumu-chan was surprised.

"It's your field, right, Yukimura-san?"

"Y-yes."

"Please teach Hime-chan next time."

"Y-yes! Please leave it to me!"

Rizumu was full of herself.

As we took our seats, Kasugai-san and Hime-chan corrected their postures, and Assistant Professor Kigamine came back. There was no sight of Kuchiha-chan.

"Sorry I made you wait."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said with a formal tone.

"Now that we're ready, we'll start with a simple paper test… So, Yukimura-san, Kasugai-san, Yukariki-san, please come with me."

"Eh……" I involuntarily uttered upon hearing the words of Assistant Professor Kigamine. "Um, Assistant Professor Kigamine, I'm…."

"You're exempt from the exam," Assistant Professor Kigamine said plainly. "Hiring you is a decision that can't be changed."

"Okay.……"

Is that okay?

I was called here today because of the exam, so when I was told that I was suddenly exempt, I couldn't help but be confused. In the first place, Assistant Professor Kigamine herself said that the aptitude test included me. Assistant Professor Kigamine, she's not like Hime-chan, but is it alright to trust me so easily? It might be better to tell her the number of people who have had painful experiences because of that.

But honestly, I'm not some old man that I need an exemption. There's nothing but garbage buried in the backyard.

"Um… about that."

And.

Suddenly, Kasugai-san raised her hand.

The eyes of the other four people concentrated on Kasugai-san.

Kasugai-san's expression was as usual.

Really, as usual.

"....What is it? Kasugai-san."

"It's hard to say, but I've decided to return home." Kasugai-san said that and stood up from the cushion. "So, if you'll excuse me."

"Eh… hold on, Kasugai-san?"

"Sorry, Ikki." Kasugai-san looked at me. "This is my selfishness, so you don't have to drive me back or anything. It's fine, I'll walk home."

"Walk……"

It would be a great distance from here.

She'll have to cross the mountain, so even when we return with the Fiat after the exam, we'll arrive at the apartment first.

"Did you remember something?" Assistant Professor Kigamine looked at Kasugai-san strangely. "If it's urgent business, then the aptitude test can be done at a later date…."

"No. That's not the case." Kasugai-san spoke in a very normal tone. "I just can't stand being in this place for one more second."

"….Eh?"

Assistant Professor Kigamine had a confused expression that showed that she couldn't understand what Kasugai-san had said. I probably looked somewhat similar to or approaching that.

"Excuse me for my rudeness, but if I were to express it more thoroughly, I can't stand to breathe the same air as you for one more second."

"What… Kasugai-san!"

"I have nothing more to say." Kasugai-san said without any emotion and bowed straight. "So then... how should I say this? Sorry if I bothered you."

And Kasugai-san walked out of the room, passing by Assistant Professor Kigamine. "Wait!" I stood up without thinking and followed her.

I almost crashed into Assistant Professor Kigamine at the threshold. She didn't avoid it. Or rather, she wasn't even looking at me. Not looking at anyone, not looking at anything, she just seemed to be digesting the words Kasugai-san said.

But I don't have time for that.

I passed by her side and ran down the hallway.

After leaving the entrance, Kasugai-san relaxed. She was neither hurrying nor waiting for me, and was walking leisurely at her own pace while whistling. I succeeded in grabbing her arm.

"……I like aggressive men quite a lot."

"No! What was that just now!?" I yelled without thinking. I didn't mean that. "That, that was rude…."

"Rude? Rude. I guess so."

"……."

"But. I'm that kind of person. Always have been."

Kasugai-san turned around.

Her face was close to being expressionless.

Reading her emotions was difficult.

Rather, it was almost impossible.

I don't know what she's thinking.

I don't understand people's feelings.

First of all, Kasugai didn't seek understanding.

That's the difference between this person and me.

I don't care about others.

I don't care about the world.

I think so.

Kasugai-san also surely thinks so.

However.

However, Kasugai-san **understands that**.

As for me, I don't understand.

Self-awareness and self-confidence and perception and knowledge.

The difference seems similar and tremendous.

Me who wishes for despair.

Kasugai-san who is facing despair.

Different like the North Pole and the South Pole.

Kasugai-san doesn't float like me.

She's rooted in her understanding.

It's not a difference in level, it's a difference in stage.

"You know me well, don't you? At least I thought you did. It's just a whim. I'd be happy if you didn't mind. Maybe it's a question of whether I need to be happy about it too."

"No… but..."

"I like an aggressive man, but my arm will start hurting soon."

"Oh, sorry."

I apologized reflexively and released her hand.

Kasugai-san didn't try to escape.

There's no reason to escape.

However, there's no reason not to escape.

That's right… I had almost forgotten.

This person is nothing.

Truly nothing

From every angle.

By eliminating all being.

Sweeping away all being.

Truly nothing.

Absence.

Too careless of an absence.

Innocence.

Too sinful of an innocence.

"…..Just one thing." Seeing that I was silent, Kasugai came closer. "Ikki. I think you shouldn't do this part-time job."

"…..Why?"

"These words aren't to my liking but…

…I have a bad feeling.

Hmm… yeah."

"…..Kasugai-san."

I had heard that from Aikawa-san and Miiko-san.

But now.

To hear those words from this person…….

Rather than the meaning, I felt that the essence was different.

"Sorry for the vagueness, but isn't that appropriate for you? Of course, also for me." With a slap, as if to encourage me, Kasugai-san struck my chest. "Well then, see ya."

"Oh… um. If you really want to return home, then if you wait, we'll go back together. It'll be night if you walk from here. It's a mountain path, so it's dangerous---"

"I'm happy or not so happy to hear you say that, but that's not good at all. It's not like I want to go home or not work. I just don't want to be here. It's not a reason."

"……."

"Please pick me up if you catch up to me in the mountains. You can ignore me if you want. Then, do your best."

"Do my best at what?"

"Life or something."

Kasugai-san pushed me back with her hand on my chest. After taking a few steps backward, I regained my balance while Kasugai-san turned away and started walking.

And she didn’t look back anymore.

Without looking at Kasugai-san’s back until it was no longer visible, I went back into the building .

In this way.

Kasugai Kasuga had erased her name from the cast of characters.

3

When I came back into the room, everyone was there.

Kuchiha-chan, who was missing earlier, was now sitting upright.

Assistant Professor Kigamine was also waiting for me at the tea table.

"…..Master."

When it was appropriate, Hime-chan asked first.

"What happened to Kasugai-san?"

"She went home." I said firmly, but to not appear too serious, I lightened my tone. "Really, that person is so reckless… She's the culmination of planning nothing. It's not that she doesn't know what she's thinking, it's that she doesn't think at all. She said she'll walk home from here. Going over the mountain with such light clothing is crazy… well, we'll just pick her up on the way back."

"…..Is that so."

Hime-chan was clearly feeling down. She wasn't really close with Kasugai-san, but Hime-chan was such a girl. I couldn't help but turn towards Assistant Professor Kigamine.

"About that. I'm sorry."

I apologized for the time being.

"It doesn't really bother me." Kigamine laughed at me as if nothing had happened. "I had predicted beforehand that this would be possible."

"…..Then it's fine."

"But Kasugai Kasuga." Assistant Professor Kigamine said with a serious expression. "Speaking of Kasugai Kasuga, it's a name that I've heard of a little. Despite her problems as a human, I admire her originality and eccentricity, as well as her overall design. I didn't think you were acquainted with such a wise person who had once been a candidate for the Seven Fools. Honestly, I feel a bit sad. I hope it didn't hurt Kusagai-san's pride that you were exempt from the exam while she wasn't… but…."

"She's not that type."

This was true.

If you asked me what type she is, I'd be in trouble.

"This is the usual. Really, this is always the case. How should I put it, her personality is similar to a rolling dice… and also kind of elusive."

"……Is that so. I have no idea why, but it seems that she hated me…. Hey, Kuchiha."

The Assistant Professor looked at Kuchiha-chan.

"You, do you have an idea?"

"Who knows.……" Kuchiha-chan answered with an unnatural smile while trying to hide something with deliberate gestures. "Sorry, sensei. I have no idea whatsoever."

"Is that so… Well it's fine. Most of the time, biologists don't understand each other." Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "It was really a blessing in disguise that Yukimura-san came. Because of that, we've secured the minimum number of people."

"Yes."

Rizumu-chan was smiling without care.

Wait, shouldn't you have predicted this beforehand……

As I thought, you're just saying that randomly.

"So the exam will be taken by Yukimura-san and Yukariki-san…." Assistant Professor Kigamine stood up and said. "Then this time for sure, please come this way. If we don't start soon, we won't have enough time."

CHAPTER 5 — INCURABLE WOUNDS (UNSAYABLE WOUNDS)

0

"I regret it."
"Then regret it for the rest of your life."

1

Natural.

Neutral.

A truly solitary person is probably, with just that, a perfect person. Speaking of how to define the term "perfect" in this case, the largest range is acceptable. If there is a concept that can live without any connection to the world at all, then no matter from what angle it's observed, it must be described as "perfect."

Perfect solitude.

Solitary perfection.

That is what's meant by "not needing to eat."

Plants can't grow without the sun and water.

If plants don't grow, animals can't be born.

Humans can't live without eating animals.

Without humans, humans can't live.

A person can't live alone.

Love, be loved, and eat each other.

It's a so-called food chain. To begin with, the world is all about eating or being eaten. Being truly solitary, truly perfect, is nothing more than trying to break out of that chain.

It's nothing more but an attempt to break out of causality.

In other words, don't eat.

In other words, don't be eaten.

Someone who won't become someone else's food, someone who won't make someone else their food.

Without wanting, and without needing.

That's why a truly solitary person is perfect. Truly perfect, and so,

a very lonely existence.

Someone who has nothing to do with anyone or anything.

However, such "perfection" will die the moment it's born; it's an existence equal to zero, and it can never change.

It can't change.

It doesn't change.

It's dry.

Without any moisture.

"...That person is wise."

Kuchiha-chan said without preface.

"Name... what was it?"

"....."

I couldn't gauge the intent of the question, but I thought it was obvious that she was only just asking for the name, so I answered simply, "Kasugai Kasuga."

"Hmm... that's right." While hearing the answer to the question she asked, Kuchiha-chan looked extraordinarily bored, and said listlessly, "By the way, what's your name?"

"Since when did you start addressing me this familiarly…"

The treatment earlier was more preferable.

I was beginning to feel fed up with this girl called Madoka Kuchiha. What is it, this… what do you call it, this feeling **of indifference**. Well, I won't say that characters like Hime-chan or Rizumu-chan are common, but are all high school students like this nowadays?

.....Huh?

High school student?

Come to think of it, she said that she didn't go to school in response to Kasugai-san's question earlier, didn't she? Then why are you wearing a blazer?

"Answer the question. What's your name?"

".....I'm sorry, but I don't give my name out in public."

"What? That's stupid."

"Maybe. But humans, if they're living, have one or two things that

they can't give out, don't they?"

"'If they're living.' Huh... you say some pretty interesting things. Sensibility is quite a good feeling," Kuchiha-chan said as if it was interesting. "Umm... Oh, yes. You were called *Master* or *Ikki* or something... so that girl, is she your disciple?"

"I'm a substitute... That girl's master is someone else. I'm acting out the role of a tutor, so it's not like I can't be called *Master*, but it's essentially different from what the word means. Well, it doesn't matter. As a guardian too, I'm a substitute."

Yuma Shisei. Jun Aikawa.

For Hime-chan, I am their alternative.

I have no particular thoughts about it.

It's just what it is.

"I don't really feel like calling you *Master*, so I'll follow Kasugai-san and call you *Ikki*." Kuchiha-chan said. "What do you want to call me? My recommendation is *Chippa*."

"......I don't feel like I'll get along with you enough to use a nickname. I'm fine with Kuchiha-chan"

"Kuchiha-chan, huh… that's also an outstanding taste."

Kuchiha-chan laughed.

It was freezing cold

It was the smile of a vampire.

"……..It's nonsense"

Hime-chan and Rizumu-chan had been taken to a separate room by Assistant Professor Kigamine, and thirty minutes had already passed since I was left alone with Kuchiha-chan in this Japanese style room.

What was being exchanged was an unproductive conversation.

An unproductive, barren conversation.

To be honest, I wanted her to leave me alone.

Despite this girl's sluggishness, she never looked away from my eyes when she spoke to me. It's as if she was trying to see into the depths of my soul.

Kuchiha-chan said my eyes were unpleasant eyes.

If you ask me, Kuchiha's piercing eyes are much, much worse than

mine.

"....Ikki… you." Kuchiha-chan said in a tone that seemed to be unaltered. "Do you want to not die?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Although our ages shouldn't be so far apart that I'd feel a generational gap."

"Does it seem so?"

"Huh?"

"Just answer the question. Do you want to not die so badly that you're interested in this fancy, ridiculous, fantastical, delusional, and ultimate topic of 'researching not dying?'"

".....That's, well, I'm somewhat interested in the research itself." I shrugged. "But my ultimate goal is just to get money. I need some pocket change."

"Materialist."

She said as if spitting it out.

……Is it that bad for college students to work part-time during summer vacation? Even so, you have no right to say that as the employer.

"I can't help it. I need money, so I have to work."

"Pragmatic materialist."

I was scorned by that play on words.

…….

A bad pun.

"Well… you surely don't seem like the kind of person who 'doesn't want to die.'"

"I'm glad you understand."

"You have eyes that want to die," Kuchiha-chan said. "Hoping for destruction… not just your own destruction, but the thorough destruction of the world. Eternal destruction. The destruction of destiny itself. You wish for the destruction of destruction."

"That's…."

Far from being affirmed, I was admonished.

"My eyes are like the eyes of a dead fish, the eyes of a traitor, the eyes of a man wanting to die, and so on. It's hard being told all that, especially since I only have two."

"You… uproot and mix everything. Like a tornado. You end up doing it unconsciously, maybe almost consciously. I wonder if it's more of a crime of passion than a conscious crime." Kuchiha-chan showed no reaction to my attempt at self-concealment. "At least, you've always done that until now... am I wrong?"

"You know… I understand that at your age it's fun to talk like you can see through people, but you're entirely off the mark."

"Off the mark? Is that really the case?"

"Honestly, you're rather laughable right now. Just like an elementary school student who's pleased to have hit a home run in soft tennis. I don't know what you've heard from Assistant Professor Kigamine, but she seems to have misunderstood something. In general, most of the trouble that happens around me is a result of people overestimating me. If Kuchiha-chan doesn't want to be in danger today or through next week, you shouldn't talk about me too much when you don't know me. You don't have to worry about me."

"I don't even know… huh. Certainly, I don't know you, but I know a similar person."

"……Similar person?"

Earlier… didn't she say something like that?

Similar and.

"What's that about?"

"Let's see. In terms of character, *he* was…..

…..Humanity's Worst."

"Humanity's… Worst?"

"Do you understand? The meaning of being said to be similar to Humanity's Worst." Kuchiha-chan said in a nasty way, sending me a gaze that looked down on me. "Though… when *he* and I met, it was before *he* became the worst."

"……And I'm similar to how he was *before*?"

"Who knows… how was it, I wonder. You're not a child, so why not think about it for yourself?" Speaking in a cheery tone, Kuchiha-chan turned to face the old clock on the wall. "The exam, including

the oral exam, will take about an hour."

"Hmm… oh, yes." The conversation took another turn. It was too abrupt, so I was left a bit confused. "Hime-chan and… Yukimura-san, right. Hmm, it takes that long."

"That's right. part-time jobs are not such an easy thing. The job being what it is, you can't really cut corners just because you're a monitor. Rather, you definitely have to take it seriously. It's pretty much impossible to be exempt from the aptitude test like you were. Do you understand how much of an exception you are?"

"....."

"And saying 'you don't have to worry about me'… you're astonishingly self-centered. You'd better redefine yourself a little more boldly… I would advise you to be more aware of what effect your existence has… That Kasugai from earlier seemed to have a good understanding of it."

"What about you…." I just couldn't stand it, so I tried to fight back. "What about you? Don't you think what you're saying is too harsh? What effect each word has on me… if you can't imagine it at all, then it's just due to a lack of imagination."

"I don't affect anyone."

Kuchiha-chan said extremely clearly.

"I know... you, follow me for a bit." Kuchiha-chan said and stood up. "You're similar to *him* so I'll tell you something good."

"Eh… Kuchiha-chan?" Something good? "No, we can just talk about it here….."

"It doesn't really matter to me or to you where we do it, but I don't want other people to hear. Japanese people have always been open minded, so they think that they've created a secret room just by dividing the space with these sliding doors, but it's delusional to think that such things as locked rooms exist in this world. I know, let's go outside."

".....I don't have anything to talk with you about."

"Oh yeah?"

Kuchiha-chan's gesture felt provocative.

I didn't take the provocation and, carefully and cautiously, spun

my words with care.

"You know, Kuchiha-chan. Don't you think your attitude has been too self-important for a while now? I don't know if you're the caretaker of this lab or whatever, but being told all of that without reservation is tough for me."

"Scary, right."

"…..That's not the problem."

"Then, saying it like this might arouse your interest. You, more or less, to some extent, have an interest in sensei's 'researching not dying,' right?"

"I guess so."

Kuchiha-chan stood up quietly.

"Hey, Ikki…."

Kuchiha-chan called out to me and smiled a bewitching smile not befitting her age.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"Here…."

"There's no way you know, right?"

And she laughed again.

….Why?

Why does this girl laugh like this? Why does she have such an expression on her face? Why does she speak like that? If this was a decade later, if she was an adult, it might have been seductive, but now, even if she does that.

The meaning can't help but be unbalanced and distorted.

Terribly improper.

Terribly unbalanced.

She.

"You know, Ikki."

Kuchiha-chan said with frightening calmness.

"My body can't die."

Without waiting for my reaction, Kuchiha-chan turned away, opened the sliding door, went out into the corridor, and closed it shut.

For a moment, I couldn't respond, as if time had stopped. No, not for just a moment. Intuitively, I felt like I had been frozen in place for a long, long time.

Returning to my senses, I got up and went out into the hallway. Kuchiha-chan could no longer be found. Which way? She said she'd go out? Then it's the entrance. Thinking that this would be my second round trip, I put on my shoes and opened the door to the outside.

Even when I looked around the parking lot, I couldn't find Kuchiha-chan.

Huh… was it the wrong way?

No, if there's a front, then there's a back. I passed through the parking lot, passing in front of the Fiat, the Katana, and the Z (thinking about it, this was too good of a spectacle to pass by. Let's take a closer look later) and slowly went around the building. There was a little garden on the opposite side of the parking lot. Even with inexperienced eyes, you could see that the grass had been cut and well cared for.

Kuchiha-chan sat cross-legged on a rock that had been placed there. She wasn't looking at me, but instead stared vacantly at the western sky that was tinted red by the setting sun.

It looked awfully ephemeral.

Enough to make me hesitate to call out to her.

It was a fragile sight.

"……Ah."

Kuchiha-chan noticed me.

Her expression looked surprised.

"……I didn't think you'd come."

"Eh?"

"I'm saying it's strange. You seem simple, but at the bottom it's really cloudy and invisible. I thought of you as someone who was very clever and wise, and who doesn't get involved in unnecessary matters."

"……."

"But you seem to be the type to stick your neck into ruin and destruction… or maybe it's your feet and not your neck? At least you

don’t seem to be like a cat whose curiosity gets you killed. Cat? I see, cats are good. Hey, do you know *If 6 Was 9* ?"

"I don’t."

"I suppose. That’s right."

"I don’t get it. What are you saying? More importantly…."

"What do you think of this world?" Kuchiha-chan asked in a manner that didn’t seem to be seeking an answer at all. "If you ask me… this world is a heap of garbage. A box packed with only garbage that can’t be reused, a demon’s yaminabe party in hell. Even Pandora’s box seems cute in comparison. A fair trade that’s not even evil. A prison of Babel where the worst is piled up on top of each other. Above all, what’s laughable is that this pile of garbage has a proper, rule-based collection system."

"....."

"Fate and inevitability and causality and destiny are… definitely foolish. It’s a comically high-end model that is essential for this world." Kuchiha-chan said and looked up at the sky, just like before I had caught up with her. "I’m not sure if there is such a thing… even if there is, it’s better not to know, right?"

"Maybe…." I answered vaguely, hoping to dodge Kuchiha-chan’s words. "At least, Kuchiha-chan. I’ll finally answer your first question now… I don’t particularly want to die. It might be a bit different than not wanting to die, but that’s the answer. It doesn’t matter to me if I die, but I don’t particularly want to die."

Really.

Why am I having such a conversation?

Ridiculous.

It’s as ridiculous as a set of repeatedly solved problems.

How many times have I said the same thing?

No matter the person, I say the same thing.

I see, in that sense.

Kuchiha-chan has absolutely no influence on me.

"It’s easy to say that you can live and die, but don’t you need a lot of energy to die? No it’s not really 'sufficient.' It takes either extreme violence or excellent skill to kill a human being. Did you know?

Human beings can live up to 120 years. It takes a whole 120 years for just one person to die. If you have that much time, bacteria would have evolved over ten generations. It's not easy to make something durable useless before it becomes useless. At the very least, it's not an easy condition to clear just by wanting to die. It's natural to want to die, but things that can't die won't die."

"Even if the person wishes for it deeply?"

"If the person wishes for it deeply… it's not impossible. For example, jumping to death. If you take one step, you can die easily. Easy, easy, really simple. People can die so easily... You can cut your wrists without any problem. You can drink poison without any problem. You can choose what gas to fill yourself up with according to your preferences, you can do whatever you want. But the question is, **can you do it**?"

"....."

"People who can commit suicide are strong."

Most people….

Humans cannot die, they can only crawl.

Squirm, suffer, struggle in vain.

Just crawl along and live.

"So, according to you." Kuchiha-chan changed her tone. It was somehow soft. At least, it felt like the thorns were missing. "I wonder if sensei's research is meaningless. Even if you don't wish to *not die*, it's easy to *not die*, that's the reasoning behind it."

"Maybe... Don't take it too seriously. Are you more honest than I thought? You don't have to take what I say seriously. My words are, without exception, all just nonsense, after all."

"Nonsense?"

"I'm a nonsense user."

I said in a pretentious tone. Apparently that pleased her, Kuchiha-chan coughed as if laughing. It wasn't as cynical as it used to be, it was just an ordinary smile.

That ordinary smile suited her well.

I thought so.

"It takes immense energy to die, huh… if that's the case." Kuchiha-

chan lifted herself up from the rock and approached me up to the closest distance in the blink of an eye, so I couldn't argue about it. "If that's the case, then I have zero energy."

"....."

"You came to talk about that, right?"

"That's right… but what kind of metaphor is that?" I took one step back. Despite being younger, unlike Hime-chan and Rizumu-chan, she was growing normally, so I couldn't stay completely composed when she was this close to me. *Not dying*... is that something related to Assistant Professor Kigamine's research?"

"Not related… I'm not talking about such a trivial level. I'm that person's **research material**."

"....Eh?"

"Would it be easier to understand it as an experimental subject?"

"Experimental… subject?"

Research… material?

What kind of metaphor is that?

While I was confused, Kuchiha continued talking.

"Well… what should I say? Sensei wouldn't be able to continue the research without me… I needed a place to live and someone to take care of me. Our interests were both aligned."

"Matching…."

Resembling.

The laboratory of Professor Shadou Kyouichirou.

Over there, a man was taken prisoner.

His name was Utsurigi Gaisuke.

He had a brilliant mind and a fearsome pair of arms.

And.

He was research material.

"....You have a look on your face like I'm doing something inhuman." Kuchiha-chan gently touched my cheek. Before I knew it, she had closed the distance again, but Kuchiha-chan continued regardless. "What? Do you have an acquaintance who had a similar experience?"

"No, there's… no such thing. It's just, Assistant Professor

Kigamine…."

"**She's still on the better side**. Or did you think that Assistant Professor Kigamine was someone who appeared in the Bible? That's laughable." Kuchiha-chan laughed. It was very derisive laughter. "Expecting a scholar to have any sense of decency is… The desire for knowledge is the least violent form of violence, the worst kind of violence one can possess."

"……."

"But, in other respects, Assistant Professor Kigamine is a good person. She doesn't interfere. I really like them, those kinds of people."

".....Is that so."

"I guess it's a love-hate relationship, but… we've known each other for a long time. Besides, **this is a good place**."

"Good place?"

"I mean, a good environment. Hey, Ikki. You talked a lot about *death* earlier, but… well, I want to hear your opinion. What do you think it means to *not die*?

Kuchiha-chan asked.

I was asked for an answer.

This time, an answer was expected.

I thought and chose my words carefully. Since I'm the Nonsense User, I shouldn't fail to select my words here.

"At the very least… I know that *not dying* is not equal to *living*. I won't say that if you don't have a life with meaning and purpose you have a meaningless life, but… in essence, life and death are two sides of the same coin. That is, they're the same existence. I can't say that denial of life is death, and denial of death is life. At least, there are some conditions that haven't been fulfilled."

"That's a cowardly answer." Kuchiha-chan was still merciless here. "Answering a question with a negative is almost the most cowardly way of answering. In the end, you're not saying anything. Does Nonsense User mean coward?"

"That's not wrong, in general. But it's only half correct. It's an overestimation, because cowards can cry."

"What does that mean?"

"Lie if you stand, cheat if you sit, sophistry if you walk. That's what a Nonsense User is. If you do that kind of thing, you'll only about half reach into the territory of cowards." After taking a breath, I asked Kuchiha-chan. "So? What does *not dying* really mean? According to your opinion on a *deathless body*."

"To *never die* means to have nothing to do with anyone."

Without hesitation, as if she had prepared that line long ago, Kuchiha-chan answered.

"To have nothing to do with anyone."

Nothing with anyone.

No relations?

Complete solitude.

That is… not dying?

"All the time, forever, no matter what happens, no matter who you meet or who you leave, no matter what fate and inevitability and causality and destiny, regardless of whether or not such evil spirits exist, without relation to the flow of the Story…..

never changing.

That's what it means to *not die*."

"Not changing…."

"What were we born for? What is the meaning of being born? I don't have an answer to those two questions. That's a *deathless body*. No matter how much time passes, no matter where you go, no matter how long you go, no matter what you say, it's always the same. That's not dying… What you said earlier, that was really good. The thing about *death* taking a lot of energy."

"Why… is that."

"In the end, energy will be exhausted, right? If we follow the law of conservation, energy is generally *changing*, isn't it? Unless you have Maxwell's demon come out, having a certain amount of energy remain in a fixed state is impossible. That's why I have zero energy."

"No, that's a metaphor…."

It's a metaphor.

Then, **it's** not a metaphor?

Is that really a deathless body?

Ridiculous.

Too ridiculous.

What normalcy am I trying to grasp?

Isn't it me who is taking her seriously?

"That said, it doesn't mean you're alive if you have zero energy."

"So I just can't die. I just won't die. I'm not alive... so I don't die."

If you live, you will die.

If you're not alive, you won't die.

That is… easy to understand.

Easy and clear.

It's clear, but… even if it's clear.

"I don't get it. If Kuchiha-chan really *won't die*... if that's the case, since when have you been alive?"

"I don't remember." Kuchiha-chan answered with a bored tone, as if she's received such questions a lot and has become tired of answering them. "It's been so long that I can't remember… how's that?"

"It's a model answer."

"Looks like you don't believe me."

"That's right."

"Believing it or not is up to you… but Ikki, do you have any idea why you were invited here, why you've been exempt from the aptitude test and why you'll be receiving no small amount of money?"

She giggled and laughed at me.

It was a cynical laugh.

"It's a strange story. Aren't you being tricked by the word 'monitor?' Hiring someone who has no expert knowledge and whose field is different. I don't know what kind of reason sensei used to persuade you, but normally that's not done. If you think about it with common sense, there's no reason."

"The reason… Assistant Professor Kigamine heard about me from somewhere, investigated me somewhere… and thought I seemed interesting. Though, I think she overestimated me."

"Overestimation, overestimation… Can you only say the same thing? Round and round the same place. What are you, a clock?"

"You're good at making retorts."

"Don't tease me. The reason why sensei gives you such preferential treatment… it's **because you're like** him. I can't say that you being interesting has nothing to do with it, but… before all of that, your career and your history, it's because you're like *him*."

"....."

"In that sense, this is an *aptitude* test. An *interview* between you and me. But you could say it's more like a police lineup."

Oh… speaking of which.

On that day, Assistant Professor Kigamine gave me various explanations but the fundamental point, **why I was investigated,** wasn't explained.

That.

So **that's what it was**.

"Similar to *him*....." I said. "You know, I've heard you say it a few times before, but… that *worst* guy. It's not clear at all, Kuchiha-chan, who is *he*?"

"Over there."

Kuchiha-chan pointed at the gate. When I didn't get the meaning of that, Kuchiha-chan asked, "Did you not see that sign over there?" And she said.

"I don't think it's something you can't see."

"Yeah… to see it or not, well, I used it as a landmark. Umm, what was it?"

"Saitou."

Kuchiha-chan lowered her finger and said.

"Saitou clinic… Saitou is sensei's mentor, or something like that. He was this clinic's owner before it became a research institute. That would be it."

"……? That's a very vague manner of speaking."

"You're similar to that person."

"....."

Even if you say that I'm similar to a guy as vague as *the worst*, it's

the same thing as saying that I resemble a demonic killer. Either way, it's just adding insult to injury.

"You look as if everything worked out as planned."

"No, not at all."

"But, as I said earlier… you're similar to how *he* was a long time ago. Before he became Humanity's Worst… **that's crucial**."

"....."

"That's the reason why sensei called you… it wasn't a whim. I wonder how many times she's willing to repeat it. That person, how many times does she really want to go through with it?"

".....Then that sentiment… well, I'm used to being projected onto someone else. I'm an empty shell, so speaking of likeness, I'm the kind of guy who looks like everybody. That's a second-hand retelling of what a certain person told me, I myself am not really aware of that."

I'm a guy who's made up of a mishmash of various faults.

I guess I was said to be that way.

"Sentiment… it isn't that lukewarm or simple of a concept. That person isn't such a human being… such a goal can only be secondary. **That person's goal… is being achieved now**."

"What?"

"**For me to talk to you is that person's goal**." Kuchiha-chan said. "After all, didn't I say this was like a police lineup? Your brain is very well functioning and wise, but I wonder if you understand **that** meaning."

"......Meaning."

Honestly, I have no idea.

"**By talking to you who is similar to** him**, she's measuring the impact on me… or getting the information I'm hiding by being asked about that by you**. Is it easier to understand if I say it like that? What do you think?"

"What do I think… that *he,* with you… I mean, did you have a good relationship?"

"You could put it like that."

The expression on Kuchiha-chan's face at this moment was exquisite and indescribable.

If you were to force me to describe it, it was a proud expression.

A look of pride, almost.

I wonder why.

That expression… it doesn't fit the current *Story*.

It doesn't fit into the current context.

Wrong.

"At the very least, he was as much of a mentor for me as he was for sensei. He taught me a lot of things that were useful."

"……If so, then it's jumping to a quick conclusion. I can't think that of a university teacher. If it worked just because we're similar, no one would have a hard time. It's like saying you can eat dumplings while watching a tortoise, that's all."

"I agree with that opinion. I agree rather than approve. On the contrary, I suppose that's why she's so desperate… sensei is a great researcher and scholar, but it seems she's not as good as he is. Well, it seems that sensei had planned this operation for a long time, but there was a shortage of human resources. That's because it's difficult to find people similar to him, even if it's before he was the worst. Besides, it's not necessarily a bad idea. In fact, I've already said too much."

Then...

Then what's with that expression?

Uttering those words with that look on her face.

It's completely mismatched.

It's completely… zigzagged.

"…..If so, shouldn't you have not said that to me? If Assistant Professor Kigamine really thinks so, then I… wouldn't it be better if I didn't know that?"

"That's true."

"Even if you noticed it as a result of insight… me and *him,* even if we do look similar, I don't think I should be aware of that fact."

"That's right."

Kuchiha-chan readily nodded.

"However, that's not a cause for offense. I'm in sensei's care, but I have no obligation to her. Using *his* existence in such a manner, can't you say it's cowardly?"

"……Hmm."

In the end….

She went to this courtyard to say that.

Until now, everything was just foreshadowing my arrival here.

It fit expectations.

It moved according to the strategy.

No treachery or resistance.

No criminal nor crime.

And yet…

It didn’t go as calculated.

If you want me to talk, then let’s talk.

Don’t leave the facts you know uprooted.

"……That’s a very complicated relationship."

You could say it’s love-hate. In response to my words, Kuchiha-chan made a face like that of an accomplice. "Well, yeah," she said.

"But don’t get me wrong. I didn’t forget that I am in sensei's care. As I said earlier, I don’t hate that person’s personality. I just don’t want to dance the way she wants me to, that’s all."

"Could you put it more simply?"

"It’s irritating that you’re trying to make things happen without my knowledge, so I wanted to bother you a little."

"……Like a child."

That’s right, Kuchiha-chan said.

"I’m not alive, so naturally I’m not going to grow. Not in mind, body, or spirit."

2

April.

On Wet Crow's Feather island, an isolated island in the Sea of Japan, where Kunagisa and I went, we met a fortune teller. It wasn't that simple of a meeting, but anyway, I met her.

That fortune teller's name was Himena Maki.

She's a pervert, a person that gets carried away easily, a heavy drinker, a person that laughs foolishly while hiding her true thoughts, a nasty personality, a person that loves money and loves to sleep. Blond hair in a ponytail.

But such small features are trivial. Such things are only an ephemeral distance from the truth. Ultimately, the word that expresses her, in other words, the word that binds her, is unique.

Supernatural power.

Yes, an abnormal ability.

Her ability is truly unquestionable, thoroughly and completely destroying anything and everything. She sees the past, talks about the present, listens to the future, and learns the heart of people.

ESP.

That too is the ultimate point that has reached the extreme.

In other words, it's the ability to read the flow of fate.

Perhaps it's the ability to read the *Story*.

"It's a useless ability," she said herself.

In reality, I can't tell whether that was true or not, whether she really did possess that abnormal ability. Perhaps it was all a lie and she was just bluffing. At least, in regards to how we can measure it, there's no point in measuring that kind of thing. How in the world can we be an observer of an observer?

Besides...

She didn't want to talk about the important things.

Kept her mouth closed.

Through talkativeness, she defended her silence to the death.

So.

However.

Even so.

Assuming her abilities are true.

Ignoring thousands of standards and piercing through thousands of contradictions.

If she had the ability to read the Story.

If that's the case, was she on the outside?

Not inside….

Just there without possessing any role.

Having nothing to do with anyone or anything.

Could you say that was a lonely soul?

"You're awfully spacing ooooooooouuuuuuuuuut. Onii-san."

I heard a voice and looked up at the tree.

There was Rizumu-chan.

No… not Rizumu-chan.

It didn't have that black manteau on. A straightjacket with a design that made you want to look away, both arms were firmly restrained and were fully exposed.

And.

The facial expression was totally different.

It was a smile full of malice.

This was…..

It was needless to think which of the two this was.

"It's… Niounomiya Izumu! The cute professional killer! Yes, yes, yes, yes, heellllloo! Yeah! Gyahahahahaha!"

".....It's dangerous to stand in such a place."

It was hard to say that the branch on which Izumu-kun was sitting on was thick and splendid. And moreover, there's the fact that he can't use both arms. And, regardless of the mind, his physical body was still that of Rizumu-chan, which was thin. To say that one shouldn't worry would be unreasonable advice.

"It's dangerous, huh… Gyahaha. Is there anything more dangerous

in this world than my head? At least here, there's nothing dangerous for me… gyahaha, besides, isn't it a nice view? Her. The sky is my birthplace, or something like that? I say good things! Gyahaha!"

"…..And the aptitude test?"

"I'm done, so I'm just taking a break… though my *little sister* was the one who took the exam. Well, she more or less did fairly well, didn't she? It might be surprising, but *she* is a surprisingly smart person. Especially in science and mathematics. Gyahaha!"

He laughed out loudly without any reason. Personally, I don't want to see that kind of thing on Rizumu-chan's face… but once you start thinking about either one's ownership of the body, there's no end.

"…..Onii-san's companion…what was it? Yes, Yukariki Ichihime, right? She's still taking the exam. She's an idiot. She might be dumber than me."

"I guess so."

"But."

His playful eyes rapidly contracted.

Too suddenly, it was a metamorphosis.

"She has definitely killed way more people than me."

"……."

Trying to lie… would be pointless.

His eyes were completely confident.

"Incidentally, the number that I've slaughtered at work has never surpassed three digits… because it's limited to one hour a day." Gyahaha, he laughed. "But that Yukariki is nothing like that… against her, I'm just a decimal. An explosives user? If not, you can't kill that many at that age. For reference, I'm 18 years old and Rizumu is 16 years old. And this body is 22 years old. Her calling herself a *graduate student* wasn't necessarily a complete lie… Hey, Onii-san. How old is Yukariki exactly?

"Seventeen."

"Huh? I see. I thought she was just a junior high student. I can't say I pleasantly agreed to this… I came out unconsciously."

"…..Unconsciously."

"Yeah. I'm automatic…well, not really! It's automatiiiiiiiiiic! Gyahahaha, just joking!"

Izumu-kun's laugh echoed.

The courtyard….

Kuchiha-chan was no longer here.

She only said what she wanted to say. In other words, when she had achieved her purpose, she said "see you later" and escaped from my field of view. In reality, that wasn't really the case, but it felt like an escape to me.

It felt like I let her slip.

I thought it was no good.

The situation has completely washed away.

It may be the usual thing, but right now, in such a situation, it's no good to be swept away as usual.

It's too dangerous.

I need to do something...to reset and go back to neutral. No, that's wrong. I have to put the gear up top. Construct the best barrier I can build to get over this situation.

Calm down.

Somehow this development has become incomprehensible.

What are my top priorities at the moment?

Take it easy. Let it go. Don't think about the meaning. Don't rush to preferences. Don't worry. Stop thinking. Throw away doubts. Don't ask questions. It's unrelated to me, right? Let's say it three times. Unrelated to me, unrelated to me, unrelated to me.

And even if it weren't… I'm not interested.

"……."

Okay.

Breathing was in order.

I could get my head in order.

I took a breath and was about to head inside… when I was called out by Rizumu-chan, or rather Izumu-kun, from on top of the tree.

"Um… Izumu-kun. Could you come down? It's hard to talk to you from that high up, it feels like you're looking down on me."

"Are you sure? I haven't killed anyone today, so I could eat you at

worst." Izumu-kun opened his mouth and exposed his teeth. "…..Because of this body, I can't even look down on people. Onii-san isn't that tall either, so it's a feeling you understand, isn't it?"

"…..By chance… did you hear that conversation?"

"Hmm?"

"That conversation just now."

"Well, yeah. But don't worry. I may have said this before, but my memory is almost never transmitted to Rizumu. The inconvenient things, I mean the **inconvenient** things about *my* **work**, are all entirely forgotten. It's an adjustment of memory… the recollection is altered, well, it's edited to some level."

Things concerning Niounomiya Izumu.

Things concerning the Niounomiya Massacre Group.

Things concerning the professional killer, the slaughter.

Everything is automatically forgotten.

Even the absolute contradiction of a *Niounomiya* searching for a *Zerozaki*, she can't notice it.

Even if it wasn't Kasugai's doing this time, the fact that money was stolen when she had *collapsed* might simply be because Izumu-kun had used it.

Falsification.

Editing.

Reorganization.

"Well, iiin ootheeer wooords, thaaaat's what I mean. From the small everyday level, to of course the deep stuff, it's a perfect oversight! From big things to small things, are we Brothers Yanmar? Gyahaha! The fact is, **what I do here** won't get transmitted to Rizumu. A memory disorder and fainting, that's the cause. Well, she's also a *great detective*. What we're talking about now, she could find out herself… Um, what was it? Knocking ten times? It's like that thing about 'a detective shouldn't discover the truth by accident.'"

"And that's fine for you?"

"It's fine for a professional killer."

"Hmm."

Well, I guess it's not bad.

I mean, a professional killer itself is bad.

According to common sense.

But.

Does it really make sense to follow common sense here?

"Oh, by the way, the 'knock ten times' earlier was a pun off of 'Knox's Ten Commandments.'"

"Don't explain."

I retorted to the killer.

You can't quite underestimate me.

"Ah… you still haven't healed that wound on your cheek, have you? I heard from Rizumu that you cut your hair, but…."

"You said that what you know can't be conveyed to Rizumi, but the opposite is true. That's why the information isn't interactive."

"The transmission from Rizumu to me isn't a hundred percent either. I heard about the hair over the **phone**. If you don't split it perfectly to some extent, you'll **get dragged along**."

"……An artificial split personality."

"Oh? What, did you study it? Oh, is your source of information Yukariki Ichihime? Wonderful, wonderful."

"Wait a minute, that's not it."

This is bad.

This guy's intuition is as good as a great detective's.

At any rate, the thing that I want to avoid the most is a conflict between Hime-chan and this non-Rizumu *Man Eater*. I don't think Hime-chan would be defeated, but that girl… I don't want her to participate in that kind of thing. In fact, I didn't even want to bring her here. In the first place, even if not, Hime-chan still… hasn't cut ties. She hasn't cut ties with her old habits. Despite following Aikawa-san's words, I never thought the situation would be like this.

".....The Niounomiya are absurd. Giving birth to an existence like yourself isn't something you would think of normally"

"Hmm. I'm not so sure. *We,* Rizumu and I, are a product, or rather a byproduct, of the *Niounomiya*. It might not be bad to get to the point of that hateful *Fragment*.... Oops, I said too much. Or did you also maybe hear about *Fragment* from Yukariki?"

"Ah, no, no...."

I grew confused.

It's bad.

Touching upon Hime-chan is bad.

It may be forced, but anyway, let's divert.

"......The fact that you appeared here… does it mean that Rizumu-chan's *work* is really a sham?"

I asked Izumu-kun directly, but asking such a thing is pointless. It won't deviate the subject. Even if it's a joke to the *professional killer*. A member of the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe. The amount of confidentiality and secrets they have to keep to themselves is as high or higher than a doctor, lawyer, or even a great detective.

"Kigamine Yaku and Kuchiha Madoka."

Izumu-kun said.

"I was told that these two people should be disposed of."

…….

Loose-lipped.

Aperture!

".....No, the aperture is different."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Oh, sorry…." Of course he won't get it. "More importantly, by whom?"

"Hey hey hey hey hey hey hey. C'mon, Onii-san. No matter how much you're Rizumu's benefactor, I can't reveal the name of a client."

"At this point you've already revealed the name of the target…."

"Well, as far as I can tell, it's Mr. Fox. You met him yesterday, right? That unpleasant masked man."

"....."

If sometime later in my life I hate someone enough to want to kill them, I wouldn't ask this guy. I'd be immediately arrested for instigating murder.

"Fox…."

The fox-masked man.

Rizumu-chan's client… was also him.

"Rizumu-chan's *job*.... then it really is a sham." I became lifeless.

When I thought of that admirable Rizumu-chan I saw in the parking lot earlier, that it was all based on a lie... even if you weren't me, even if you were me, you'd be trapped in emptiness."Then… that fox-masked man is naturally aware of you. Not as brother and sister, but as a person."

"We've been something like raised by that guy recently… It seems he isn't going to move openly. I don't know much about it… it seems that Rizumu also doesn't know that much either, but, well, it doesn't matter. So, *we are* that Mr. Fox's limbs, his arms and legs or something. In that sense, the *Great Detective*, Rizumu, is full of useful information, right? It's not like everything was a lie. It seems like her journey to find the youngest child of the Zerozaki didn't bear fruit. Hmm. Zerozaki Hitoshiki. An unpleasant guy."

He murmured, the latter mostly to himself.

"But you're right about this one. When it comes to work, Man Eater is the main and Carnival is the sub… Naturally, she's the one that carries out the intelligence gathering. First, Rizumu *investigates*, and according to the results of her investigation, Izumu does the *killing*. That's the usual modus operandi for *us*. Oh, don't worry. I'm not saying we'll do something today just yet. Since you looked after Rizumu, I'll wait until the part-time job ends like you asked of her, as long as it's not a problem."

"I hope so."

I sighed.

Ah, what the hell.

Not related to me, not related to me.

It has nothing to do with me.

I know already.

Kigamine Yaku.

Madoka Kuchiha.

The professional killer's targets.

I asked Rizumu-chan the same thing.

"……Why did Mr. Fox ask you and Rizumu-chan to do that? To kill those two people, even though… Rizumu-chan said that *he seemed to be interested* in them."

"Who knows. I don't know. I'm to kill them and that's all, I do it in a way that follows the client's intentions."

"……You're the worst professional killer."

"The worst… that's a synonym for Zerozaki. Although… the etymology is different isn't it. Hmm? Wait a minute. The Saitou East Clinic… Oh? Oh, oh, oh… ooh?"

Izumu-kun tilted his head, becoming more and more sideways until, finally, he lay sideways on that branch that could by no means be called thick. It was very dangerous.

"Hmm… ah, I see. That's what it is… Mr. Fox's situation is **like that**… Oh, I didn't notice. No, I don't particularly care, it doesn't matter at all. I guess that person is also having a hard time…."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking to myself. By the way, Onii-san. Is one okay?"

"Eh?"

"I have only received questions. I was asked questions by you and I explained the obscure and hard to understand parts for the sake of introductions, right?"

"Well, I guess so, but…."

"I want to ask one."

Izumu-kun said.

"Is that okay?"

"It's fine… what is it?" I was full of caution, but I put up a bold front and responded to Izumu-kun, who was lying down, with a question. "I can't carry out the wish of a *man* without hearing its contents. Why would a murderer carry my palanquin?"

"Gyahahahahaha! To say such a thing." After making just one move, I got laughed at. "Why should I work with someone lower than myself? Don't you know about the equity theory?"

"Things are how they are, so I won't argue with you about that."

"My request is," Izumu-kun said. "After this, you and Rizumu… I mean, it's also me, but not me, just Rizumu, can you become friends with each other?"

"…….Eh?"

"**She** doesn't have any friends at all."

He raised himself up from the branch and straightened his posture. Suddenly, he bent his back and was now hanging upside down with his legs hooked. By doing so, the position of both my and Izumu-kun's heads were almost at the same height.

"Well, it's mostly my fault, but **she** has many eccentricities. I can't speak for other people, but after all, Rizumu is an artificial personality, so the eccentricities stand out."

"....."

"Not to mention, she's also a *great detective*… but you seem to be affected by such things. It looks like you're able to successfully get along with Rizumu."

"No, I'm pushing myself quite a bit…." I responded to Izumu-kun with a feeling of regret. "Well, I'm used to being with weirdos… but in regards to the occupation of a *professional killer,* let's see, I have a friend who's a demonic killer, so I'm partly used to it."

"That's good for you, but…."

Izumu-kun said while hanging upside down.

"The true horror of murder… you can't truly understand it unless you're on the side of the killer or the one being killed. If you're a bystander, even if you think you've grown accustomed to it, you'll just get swept out from under your feet. In that sense, it gives the impression like you're half-baked."

"That is… thank you. For the info."

The side of the killer.

The side of the killed.

If you've lived a life where you've never been either… well, that's really nice.

That is, however, unfortunately unfortunate.

"Anyway, what about you? Mr. Fox seems to somewhat like you... luckily for you,"

"It looks like there's a connection."

……A connection?

What's that about?

Is it fashionable? That phrase.

At least locally.

".....Well, it's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know about friends, but… I think Rizumu-chan is an interesting girl to tease. If we can socialize more in the same way, then it's no problem."

"Thank you so much. You'll make me shed tears."

"But I have one condition." Just as I had said to Rizumu-chan a moment ago, I said to Izumu-kun. "Not just **here**, but **from now onward**, I don't want you to kill anyone in front of me."

"Huh? What's that?"

"I don't like it. People dying."

Izumu-kun stared at me blankly.

The metaphor is backwards, but it was like preaching to the Buddha.

Still, I continued.

"I'd like you to do it in a place that's unrelated to me… I don't like it when people die in a place connected to me… it makes me feel depressed."

"……Feel depressed, hey…."

Without using his arms (obviously), Izumu-kun spun around with just the power of his legs and stood in a well-balanced position on the branch. And then… he looked down at me and laughed.

"Who do you think I am? The 18th member of the Massacre Magic group, the Niounomiya Troupe, the product of the 13th experiment, right? Regardless of whether the target is related or unrelated, if the target resists or doesn't resist, if the target has connections or lacks connections, eating until nothing is left, the professional killer among professional killers, Izumu the *Man Eater*. To stray from killing the ones I must kill would mean starvation."

"....."

"Gyahaha." Izumu-kun laughed a little.

"But… well, I can promise that much. To begin with, I rarely come out except when I am at work… It doesn't seem like there'll be an

opportunity for me to work in front of you in the future."

"…….Why."

I took a step forward.

Just one more step, let's go deeper.

Take the risk and get closer to the truth.

"So why *now*?"

"Huh?"

"Now… why are you in front of me? If your job is to wait until after Rizumu-chan finishes investigating, then there's no reason for you to appear in front of me now. You said you were worried about Hime-chan, but I can't imagine that you would need to risk so much for that reason alone."

"……."

"So you showing up *now* means nothing for your work."

On the contrary, it can be said to have the opposite effect.

If anyone were to see this place… if Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan who are the *targets* were to see, it would be decisive.

There's no reason.

Or does he have some plan?

If so, what is it?

Something worth the risk.

Something that can be traded for risk.

"……Well, yeah."

Izumu-kun said, as if he didn't know the answer himself and was speaking while thinking, looking for an even higher heaven while speaking from the highest point.

"…..Oniisan. Do you know what it means to be strong?"

"Strong…."

"It's not the same thing as what you talked about with Madoka, but… *not dying* is not the same thing as *living*, and *strong* doesn't mean *not weak*. Excessive strength will inevitably involve weakness. You're respectable, so you probably don't know this, but, for example, in my world there's a being called the Death Colored Crimson."

"Death Colored Crimson …?"

Certainly, it's a name I've never heard of.

Does Hime-chan know about it?

"That person is so strong that it's stupid to think about, but that doesn't mean that person has a 100 percent success rate at work. Rather, their achievement rate is somewhat low for the stage that they're at. Probably lower than mine. Do you know why?"

"So… in other words, because you're *strong*, your opponents are overly cautious? That… before you can accomplish your *work,* they escape or possibly surrender…."

"That's right. Extraordinary strength goes beyond being a threat and just becomes a risk. If your strength reaches an outrageous level and you're already a disaster of an existence… before long, things such as victory and defeat won't materialize for you. I'm not talking about equity theory, but in order to decide the outcome, who wins and who loses, you need to implement the game first. *Winning* and *losing* need to be fair. In other words, a being that is too dangerous *cannot win*."

"…..I see." I nodded. "Speaking in terms of **this world**, it's the same assumption with nuclear weapons and other such arms. Come to think of it, I've heard it before. *If you're too strong, you can't get serious*. If you're too strong, there's no opposition. Because there's no opposition, there's no balance."

"Umm? Ha, haha, balance. Well, there are guys like you around who say such sensible things. Gyahaha! Amusing, amusing."

"……."

This guy laughs a lot.

Rizumu-chan is the same.

I don't understand the feelings of someone who laughs without reason.

There's no meaning to a smile.

"If I go there… well, I'm quite biased towards *strength*. That's how I was created. To be honest, I haven't even seen the *Death Colored Crimson*, but… yes, being too strong is the same as being too weak. The strongest and the weakest commute."

Strong is weak, weak is strong….

Izumu-kun made a play on Shakespeare.

"I'm not saying something lukewarm like there being a paper-thin difference between strength and weakness. Strength and weakness are two sides of the same coin. That's why you need a precise sense of balance. *Weakness* has a negative image preceding it. We're not wary of the weak… they're not regarded as something dangerous. And if you're aware of the weakness, you'll let your guard down. It can become deadly. If you have nothing to protect, you don't have to defend yourself. If you have nothing, you can be greedy. If you have abandoned everything, you won't despair. If you run last, you won't get shot from behind. You'll be able to see everyone without being seen by anyone. Create a chink in the human heart. Strong is weak, weak is strong, but of course it's not enough to just be weak. You need a balance between weak and strong… like yin and yang. Light and dark, positive and negative…."

"That's… you and Rizumu-chan."

"Yeah, yeah. *Man Eater* and Carnival." Izumu-kun said really happily. "In short, this me… well, **this body** possesses *strength* and *weakness* separately. Rizumu is entirely in charge of my weakness."

"....."

Multiple personalities.

Artificial Dissociative Identity Disorder.

An artificial personality….

Isn't it just Rizumu-chan?

It's not one plus one is two.

It's one divided by two is two halves.

"Well this is just one of the experimental trials of the The Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe… to catch the byproduct? It's too much trial and error for one to understand. I don't know if I'm a success, but at least I tower above the rest when it comes to *strength*, to the extent where I can't *control* myself if I don't wear these clothes."

"....."

Finally….

I understood the reason for that straightjacket.

But there was no sense of accomplishment. Here… at this point, at

this point, we were at the stage where such a thing, such an extremely trivial thing, no longer mattered.

"As I am now… I'll even surpass the *Death Colored Crimson*, so one way or another, I want some chance to compete with them, but to borrow Mr. Fox's word's, finding such a fate between the *Death Colored Crimson* and me seems to be so difficult as to be impossible… But setting that aside," Izumu-kun said. "I'm not so inhuman that I feel nothing for Rizumu, who's in charge of my weakness… After all, she's basically my younger sister, and before that, myself. "

"…….Younger sister… and yourself, huh."

"It's rare to see her be **continuously** lively like when she's with you, that Kasugai, or that young girl. All I see is that she's always rejected, hurt, and above all, she forgets it all in a flash, that poor figure of Rizumu."

"Forgets…."

"Rizumu, who's in charge of my *weakness*, forgets even her own wounds. If she gets hurt and the wound remains and she stops coming into contact with other people, she won't be able to carry out her role as *Carnival*."

"Role…."

Falsification of memory. Editing of memory.

All inconvenient things are forgotten.

It all fits coherently in her mind.

Her world is closed.

"No matter how much she's hurt, no blood will flow from those wounds. It's laughable, laughable. Weak, weak, too weak."

"…..Yeah"

It's….

Too weak.

I don't know such a poor weakness.

Specialized in weakness, Cannibal.

Such a poor weakness….

I don't know anyone but myself.

"Mr. Fox's handling of Rizumu is still preferable, but Mr. Fox isn't the type to *make friends with*."

"Hmmm… but if it's Rizumu-chan, I feel like she could truly, truly, truly get along with anyone, even if it's not with me. Of course, she has a lot of eccentricities, but if you can accept them…."

"Sure, she's skilled at socializing. That carefree idiot can completely ignore all the twists and troubles of human relationships, even without having her memory rewritten. She can make a forced smile amiable. That's also the privilege of *weakness*… for the sake of the investigation, it's the privilege of weakness. But..."

Izumu-kun corrected his words.

"In the end, that's temporary."

"Temporary."

"It's hollow. If I come out, it's over."

".....Ah"

Professional killer.

The Massacre Magic Group.

The Niounomiya Troupe.

Yes, basically, that's it.

No matter what kind of character Rizumu-chan is….

There's no changing that she's a cannibal.

The transience shuts there.

Everything turns hollow.

The possibility of knowing everything and still staying at Rizumu-chan's side without hurting her, how likely is it?

Knowing everything.

And yet not changing.

If there's anyone who can stay the same.

"So… I'm the one, huh."

"I'm fine. I'm a professional killer, I don't need friends. I don't curry favors with anyone, and I don't bend to anyone. I live relying on my own abilities. That's fine… but she's not on this side, right? Don't you think that being treated like me would be a bit lonely?"

".....It would be."

That's the reason why he came out *now*.

The meaning of why he appeared before me.

If he missed this opportunity, it's true that Izumu-kun and I wouldn't see each other again. If Izumu-kun is aware of Hime-chan, then he can't afford to talk in the building.

"For me, Rizumu is a *puppet*, a *shadow*, a *place to hide*, or a remote-controlled autonomous RC… before that, she's also my *younger sister*. Only, what can I do for her? She's my helpless younger sister."

"……..Siscon."

"Basically."

Gyahaha, Izumu-kun laughed.

"Your terms, I'll accept them… I'll make a contract with you. I won't kill in front of you for any reason besides self defense. The hour of slaughter will be for when you're not present, instead"

"I understand. But as I said, I don't particularly plan on changing how I deal with Rizumu-chan… it'll be just as it's been."

"That's fine. The only thing I'm expecting from you is that you *don't change* too much."

"Don't change… right."

"So, Onii-san, erotic things are also prohibited, yeah? Yeah! Whoo!!" Gyahaha, Izumu-kun laughed. "Yo, yo, yo! If I feel pain above a certain threshold, if I feel a sense of crisis, I'll come out automatically."

"……That worry is useless."

"Gyahaha! Hey. Then, Onii-san, on that note, the contract has been concluded."

"Ah… then I'll head back inside, but what about you?"

"Hmm… that's right. Yeah, yeah… let's have a time delay for when we get back. It'll be suspicious if we return together. I'll **withdraw**."

"Yeah. That might be a good idea. Hmm… I might never see *you* again…."

I hesitated a bit, but then, with a little bit of embarrassment, I decided to say it anyway.

"If we have a connection, let's meet again."

3

One of the works of Grimms' Fairy Tales is titled "Brother and Sister." As a fairytale, it has a standard and orthodox structure. A long time ago, there was an older brother and a younger sister. Naturally, their mother is dead, and naturally, they're abused by the stepmother, and after being unable to endure the severe abuse, they run away and conceal themselves within a sea of trees. But the malicious stepmother magically creates a spring in the sea of trees, and when the brother drinks the water from the spring, he turns into a stupid deer.

And, of course, the ending is a happy ending.

The brother and sister lived happily together forever.

However, there's no one who doesn't think of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" when they hear this story. To be honest, I don't even want to remember how that story ends or what kind of brother and sister are in it. And I don't even want to compare the two stories and think about which one is more based on reality.

As a matter of fact, I had once possessed the existence called a younger sister as a reality, not as a fictional narrative, but that doesn't mean there was any story to it. Before I could do anything towards my younger sister, just one act worthy of an older brother, she had lost her life.

"A younger sister… certainly, that's an exceptional being."

Parting with Izumu-kun, I went around the building to return to the room I was in, but I stopped as I turned to the parking lot. Hmm, come to think of it, I wanted to take a closer look if I had the time. The Fiat… apart from that which I had frequently looked over.

The Katana and the Z.

I don't know much about motorcycles, but I do at least know of the Katana. A 750cc motorcycle… Aside from her young body's arms, it's difficult to tell if Rizumu-chan could reach with her legs. But really how do you do something like that in a straightjacket….

"....."

I guess it can always be taken off.

If you think about it normally, she could always have put on the straightjacket after coming here. There are people here like Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan who can help with at least that much.

No, even if that's fine this time, what does she normally do? I don't think there are people that kind everywhere… In the first place, setting aside the reason for the straightjacket that I got from Izumu-kun, it's too mysterious for Rizumu-chan to be dressed like that **without having any doubts**. The mystery just keeps on getting deeper. I wonder if that also has something to do with the reorganization of her memory. Her personality **was made** to not have any doubts about her strange appearance, is that what that means?

"....."

Next, the purple Z.

I'm a commoner, so if asked to choose between the two, I'd prefer the Fiat, but that doesn't mean I'm so tasteless that I don't feel anything about the coolness and stylishness of a sports car. I think that Mr. Fox's Porsche and Jun-san's Cobra are good… Well, even if I were to do a headstand right now, I can't afford to buy a Porsche or a Z or even a Katana. It's fine, I like the Vespa. I got it from Mikoko-chan. I love you, Mikoko-chan.

"……Hmm."

Looking at the sky, it seemed to be getting darker, as expected. That's how it looks here in the mountains, but isn't it already considerably severe in the mountains? Even though the road is paved...

I'm still worried about Kasugai-san.

She's always resolute, but Kasugai-san isn't particularly fit, is she? She might run into a stray dog or something… Oh, that person is fine as far as animals are concerned. But physical strength is still a problem. If she were to pass out just like Rizumu-chan, there'd be no one there to help.

……..Really, she's such a handful.

Right.

I'll have to catch up to her soon.

After finishing the small appreciation party, I opened the door and took off my shoes before going inside. I took the return route down the corridor, which I had already memorized, and opened the sliding door.

"Ah! It's Onii-san!"

Rizumu-chan was the only one there.

She must have gone on ahead while I was looking at the cars… as the *Man Eater*, I guess he went through a window or something. If we just believe Izumu-kun's words as they are, then Rizumu-chan's perception and Rizumu-chan's memory will be "I've been alone in this room since I finished the aptitude test." Something like that, I guess.

Reorganization, huh.

"Where did you go? I was lonely!"

"Hmm… I was out front looking at the cars in the parking lot."

"Huh. Onii-san, do you like cars?"

"Unlike humans… machines are easy to understand and don't betray… that's what a friend of a friend said."

"A car isn't a machine. It's a living thing."

Rizumu-chan said sharply.

"I'm counting on you for that."

"……..Hmm."

It seems better to avoid discussion.

The situation could become considerably poor.

"How did you do on the exam?"

"Perfect!" Rizumu-chan had a big smile. "Probably the perfect score, ten thousand!"

"That's good."

While talking half-mindedly, I wondered where Kuchiha-chan had gone. I guess she has her own room somewhere… Now that I think about it, I still only know how to get from the entrance to this room. I'm sure there's a laboratory and a preparation room here somewhere, but….

But, well, what.

This has become somewhat complicated and troublesome.

…….

I wonder if I can cancel even now.

Then.

I heard footsteps coming from the hallway.

Two people.

"...I think it's a bad idea to leave the sliding door open."

It was Assistant Professor Kigamine and Hime-chan.

Assistant Professor Kigamine was as usual.

Hime-chan was exhausted.

Or rather, her eyes were dead.

"....."

"The exam has been successfully completed," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "Then, Yukimura-san and… Yukariki-san both passed…."

Although she was as cool as usual, her face twitched a little at "Yukariki-san," like she was in denial. I felt some reluctance.

…….

If Kasugai-san was here, Hime-chan would have failed.

Although now, for me, this selection of people was difficult.

"I look forward to working with you next week."

"Yes," I answered. "Hime-chan too."

"....."

No reply.

She was just like a corpse.

"Yes! I'll do my best!"

Rizumu-chan was full of spirit.

But she's a spy.

And a professional killer.

"Well… then what are your plans after this? If you have the time, we can have dinner together…."

"Oh, no." I refused Assistant Professor Kigamine's invitation. "We need to catch up with Kasugai-san as soon as possible. Even if it's her, it's dangerous for a woman to walk alone."

"Oh… that's right," Assistant Professor Kigamine nodded. "Then let me at least see you off… Huh? Where did Kuchiha go? I should have told her to deal with you here."

"I'm not sure. Onii-san, do you know?"

"Hmm…."

How should I explain it?

I could speak honestly, but… it seems like Kuchiha-chan herself wants that… well, me too.

Even for me, it's annoying to just go along with Kuchiha-chan's plan. I have no reason to do so nor any obligation towards her whatsoever.

"I tried to make a move on her and she ran away."

"Is that so. I see."

Don't be convinced!

Ah… Rizumu-chan is looking at me with contempt!

"I predicted beforehand that you would fail to seduce Kuchiha."

"....."

It's pointless to make excuses.

It's important for humans to give up.

I picked up Hime-chan, who was stuck to the tatami mat like ice cream, and carried her on my back. Hime-chan's body is very light. Now that her soul is gone, it's even lighter.

….Is there a weight to the soul?

"Well, excuse me. Thank you for your time."

"Yes."

"Ri-Yukimura-san, what will you do?"

I asked Rizumu-chan.

"Oh, I'll stay here and talk for a bit longer."

She said.

It seems she was going at her own pace.

Great Detective. Professional killer.

Well… it's none of my business.

It has nothing to do with me.

There's no need to worry about Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, and there's no need to think about why the fox-masked man is using Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun.

There is none.

It is absent.

"Then, I'll see you next week, Yukimura-san."

"Yeah. Goodbye for a short while." Rizumu-chan smiled broadly. "Well then, goodbye!"

"I will try my best."

And.

Exactly as we said, we parted for a short while.

About five minutes.

The parking lot.

Fiat, Katana, and Z.

A total of ten tires had been destroyed.

CHAPTER 6 — DISCREPANCY (WHICH?)

KIGAMINE
YAKU
ASSISTANT
PROFESSOR

0

The loser dies in despair.
The winner dies in yearning.

1

"What! So Master, you mean you didn't cry even when you read *The Cat Who Lived a Million Times*!?"

"Yup."

"You're a demon!"

Hime-chan pointed a finger at me. Her expression was so menacing that I thought she was going to stick it into my eyeball.

"I was so nervous that I broke down crying after reading that masterpiece! Hime-chan broke down crying while reading at the bookstore!"

"Buy it."

"Then, then, 'Air on the G String!?' Oh, no matter how many times you hear that, even Master would be in tears!"

"Um… what kind of song is that?"

"……(speechless)"

"Oh, I remember."

"Did you remember now!?"

"That's such a sluggish song."

"Kee!!"

She hit me.

"Ba-ba-apologize to Bach-sensei! Get on your knees before Wilhelm-sensei!"

I suffered a series of blows.

It hurt quite a bit.

"But, I mean… don't you think it's harder to be impressed by something that has a high reputation or is famous for being first-class? It makes me put up my guard."

"Uuuuuh. That's not true!"

Hime-chan rejected my words with her whole body. I wonder if Aikawa-san's love of clichés has also infected Hime-chan.

"Then, then, then, Master, when do you cry?!"

"……When I use eye drops."

"Those aren't tears!!"

Hime-chan was truly angry.

"Uugu fueen!!"

Or rather, she was genuinely crying.

Don't cry.

"Oh, what about movies!? Master, what kind of movies have you seen!?"

"Hmm… mini theater. But basically, I don't go to the movie theater that often… I'm not a fan of major works. Come to think of it, I recently watched *Tale of Tales*[1] in Houko-chan's room."

"Keh! Stop being pretentious!"

"……"

Her personality changed.

Is that her true nature?

"Idiot! Master should've been moved by the climax scene of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* with the swarm of insects!"

"Master doesn't understand anymore."

I lay down on the futon. Geez…what is this? What's with my fate that I have to have a conversation like this like it's the night of a school trip? "At any rate," while looking at the ceiling, I set the topic's coordinates to a more reasonable location.

"It seems… like things have become strange."

I said so.

How, or rather, since when did the situation become this odd? Even when things weren't strange, I would've said something like, "things have become strange," but in this case, that was not a strong sentiment or a metaphor, but an objective expression.

"Don't change the subject! Even Hagihara-san says that people who aren't interested in the arts and culture are worthless…."

"No, this isn't the kind of scene where you can force the conversation from the introductory part to continue." Read the mood,

the mood. "....Hime-chan, come to think of it, you've got make-up classes tomorrow. You won't be on time if we wait for repairs."

"Whatever!" Hime-chan boomed and clapped her hands in front of her chest. "That was all completely forgotten!"

"You…."

So your core didn't become any better.

"Now, now. Master, tomorrow's wind will blow tomorrow."

"It's not bad to say such an unusually accurate fixed phrase at this point, but today's wind can only blow today."

It was past 9:00 at night on August 15th.

Hime-chan and I were on the second floor, in a room that was probably used as a hospital room when the clinic was in use. Hime-chan was on the bed provided and I was on a futon on the floor. There's another hospital room next door where Rizumu-chan should be. Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan have their own rooms on the first floor.

Just like that, it was a sleepover.

"....."

It's not like saying it in a cute way changes anything.

Incidentally, if I were to put it in a not-so-cute way, then it's a stormy mountain retreat.

"I wonder what I should say to Miiko-san…."

Naturally, a punctured tire on a car isn't fixed the same way a punctured tire on a bicycle is. The location of this institute was too rural to get it repaired. The gas station was closed early and the repairman was on summer vacation. Even if I tried to fix it myself, the spare tire was thoroughly damaged, and even if that wasn't the case, there weren't ten spare tires in the first place.

Assistant Professor Kigamine said that it was probably a prank by the students of a nearby middle school (though it's a thirty minute walk). My opinion was that there was no way a middle school student would harass us with such care. Three people didn't have an opinion (Rizumu-chan, Hime-chan, and Kuchiha-chan).

However, after taking such an unproductive majority vote, we had no options.

Taking a taxi home from here would cost so much that I'd die. Taking a train or a bus was impossible. There was one bicycle, but it wouldn't be able to cross the mountain. It would be better to walk, but from now on, the entire journey would be during the night. We didn't have the guts that Kasugai-san had.

Assistant Professor Kigamine had originally planned to stay here starting from today to prepare for next week, and Kuchiha-chan originally lived here. However, Hime-chan, Rizumu-chan, and I were in a position where we couldn't say "originally...."

So we took advantage of Assistant Professor Kigamine's kindness.

…..That was the gist of it.

We ate the dinner that Kuchiha-chan made (which tasted so-so) and then took turns showering. It seems the place was furnished with a bath. The order was Hime-chan → Rizumu-chan → Kuchiha-chan → Assistant Professor Kigamine → me.

Hime-chan already finished showering and was wearing a long t-shirt she borrowed from Kuchiha-chan. Right now the one taking a shower is… timewise it's probably Kuchiha-chan.

Yeah.

That was the current state of affairs.

The situation had become odd.

In any case, this was a situation where I was taking advantage of another's kindness.

That was certain.

But I wonder what is it, this situation.

Somehow… it's *strange*.

Strange.

"…..What did you think? Hime-chan."

"Yes?"

"Somehow… this is quite a contrived development, isn't it? It feels like someone doesn't want us to leave here."

"Is it? It may surprisingly be exactly as Assistant Professor Kigamine said. These days middle school students don't know what to do. When Hime-chan was a middle school student----"

"Sorry, but your story about your time in middle school isn't going

to help."

"You're awful!"

"I'm not!"

I got irritated and retorted back.

Really, that is the definition of a shameless thief. I don't intend to ever forget what you and the other members of your high school (and Aikawa-san) made me go through two months ago.

"…..Besides, in the first place, who'd benefit from preventing Hime-chan and Master from going home. ?"

"We're not necessarily the target. We may have just been caught in the middle, as usual…."

"Then who is?"

"Maybe Assistant Professor Kigamine or Kuchiha-chan…." Or the two *Cannibals*."Maybe Yukimura Touko-san. And… thinking about the mechanics, it was probably committed by someone on the inside."

"That's how it is, huh."

"Yeah."

At the very least, all of us had the opportunity.

Not everyone was keeping an eye on each other.

It's not like there was always someone with someone else. Hime-chan and Rizumu-chan, who were taking the exam, or Assistant Professor Kigamine, who was supervising them, wouldn't have had the spare time, but they probably could've gone to the bathroom alone. And as for Rizumu-chan, she finished the exam early and **Izumu-kun came out**. Not to mention me and Kuchiha-chan, who had been free the whole time. So Izumu-kun, Kuchiha-chan, and I had a better opportunity than Rizumu-chan, Hime-chan, and Assistant Professor Kigamine.

"But what's it for?"

"Hmm. When asked that…."

Me.

Yukariki Ichihime.

Kigamine Yaku.

Madoka Kuchiha.

Niounomiya Rizumu.

Or Niounomiya Izumu.

These six… whoever you take, each has their own goal. Rizumu-chan's *goal* is actually just a means for Izumu-kun's *goal*, but even so, in the first place, the two are the same person and their relationship is an equal sign, so we don't have to worry about that.

But.

However.

What's going on?

This phenomenon… it's seemingly pointless.

It doesn't fit with anyone's goal.

The law of cause and effect has not been established at all.

"Somehow… it's out of place, or rather, it feels like it's missing some vital point. I don't know what to do about this strange feeling."

"Master likes to worry. It's like you're a worry enthusiast. Isn't it completely normal for Master to get dragged into unreasonable trouble? There's no point in worrying about such a basic thing."

"If you keep telling yourself that everything was inevitable, you won't be able to move forward… I can't be that optimistic."

"You're really paranoid. Master, are you okay? You know, there's an old saying that goes 'to trust a person is to profit.'"

"That's a way of remembering kanji."

Good grief. I stretched my body.

"Oh. Oh, yeah, I need to call Kasugai-san… I wonder if that person has a cell phone."

Even if she does, I don't know the number. Then let's contact Miiko-san… that person doesn't have a cell phone either, but she'll be home at this hour….

I see… right.

Well, I guess I should resolve myself.

Now that we're in this situation, it can't be helped.

It's a bit stressful to be under the same roof as a professional killer, but I'm sure Izumu-kun won't appear on the *front* anymore. When we first met, he said something about having to use an extraordinary amount of energy to get to the *front*. I don't know if that's the truth or a lie, but still, if you have to constantly balance

your mind, then I guess your body will end up imbalanced. Like the "fainting habit" of Rizumu-chan and the "one hour a day" of Izumu-kun.

You get what you pay for.

That's also called the pros and cons.

However… the problem isn't just with Izumu-kun (and Rizumu-chan). Even Kuchiha-chan (and Assistant Professor Kigamine) are problematic to the extent that I don't know how to describe it.

".....Um. Hime-chan."

"Yes, yes?"

"I want to borrow the knowledge of *Shiogi-chan, the dictionary*." I raised my body and faced Hime-chan with a serious tone. "First, is it possible to create an immortal person?"

"Hmm… okay. However, there weren't many occasions where Hagihara-san spoke seriously about immortality… she said things like immortality is a romanticism that will never come true, or that it's opportunism as an escape from reality."

"Hmm…."

I don't really understand.

Shiogi-chan was unexpectedly a poet?

"But Hagihara-san continued after that, saying, 'As a theoretical methodology, it's not an impossible subject.' So don't consider this a serious story, think of it as one told on the night of a school trip, after you turned off the lights and got into the futon."

".....So there was a school trip. Even though you were in different grades…."

"To be precise, it was a training camp. Well, to put it simply, *immortality* in the material sense is the metabolism. It's the regenerative ability that accompanies it. In addition, the immune system has the ability to adapt to the ever-changing environment around us. If these are perfect, human beings basically don't age. Or rather, they can maintain their *state of health*. Because they don't age, they don't die. In other words, they're immortal."

"I see."

This scene was like something out of a science fiction novel.

Cell copy integrity… genetic perfection.

If you're invulnerable, then you're also immortal.

"But what about brain cells? When brain cells reach a certain amount, they stop multiplying and they have no regenerative ability… I've heard something like that."

"If you retort with such idle gossip it's a bit troublesome… Well, it's like a floppy disk. If you keep forgetting all the non-critical stuff, and if you don't remember anything but the important stuff, then isn't it fine to a certain extent?"

"To record… no, **to not remember**. But… then it doesn't make much sense to be immortal."

"There's a reverse methodology. If you're going to die, just record your personality on some organic media and transfer it to another new, healthy body… or something like that. You could say it's like a brain transplant."

"Only Dr. Black Jack could do that kind of surgery… Well, in that case, if you were made into a half-cyborg, you could be immortal. Program the personality onto something like a DVD disc, copy it, and then put it into a mechanical body....."

I'm starting to feel like an idiot.

What kind of topic is this?

If that was possible, there'd be no hardship.

Even if it's utter pseudoscience at best.

Disregarding reality and practicality.

Theory that's not accompanied by practicality.

It's just like… ESP.

Just like fatalism.

Just like magic.

"So the solution to get as close to *immortality* as possible is to have a high metabolic rate and an innate ability to regenerate cells that is *superior to that of an ordinary person*. The theory behind what I just said is that replacing the parts that can no longer be used is fundamentally a hypothetical model of that nature, but in the end,

such a thing would cost an astronomical amount of money." Hmm, I took a breath. "So I guess immortality like that of a vampire is impossible… With such a realistic *immortality*, surviving a shot to the back of the head is impossible."

"……Hime-chan isn't really interested, but," Hime-chan said as a preface. "How does Assistant Professor Kigamine approach that area?"

"So far, I don't know… No more than what was already explained. And it doesn't really seem like she intends to inform us."

"Eh?"

"That's certainly the right decision… Well, I'll tell Hime-chan. Kuchiha-chan, I heard that she has a *deathless body*."

"Huh?" As expected, Hime-chan responded in the same way that I did when I heard it. "What kind of metaphor is that?"

"Who knows… That's what the person in question said."

"The person in question...? That sounds like a lie."

"Well… whether it's a lie or the truth, it sounded like a lie anyway. Not trusting self-referential remarks, no matter who you're dealing with, is one of the most basic of basics. It's an absurd thing to say… At this point, it feels like Kasugai-san's decision to leave quickly was the correct one."

"Was it? Even so, Hime-chan is having fun," Hime-chan said with a smile. "Going out and staying with Master somehow makes the inside of your chest get excited, doesn't it?"

"Oh… Come to think of it, I've never been on an overnight trip with Hime-chan before."

"That's right."

"Is it?"

It's not such a simple thing, is it?

She looked like she didn't have any worries at all.

"Then let's go on a proper trip sometime. Not to some weird place, but to a hot spring inn."

I decided to put aside the topic of Kuchiha-chan and went with Hime-chan's topic. Trying to force the worries you're harboring on another person for the sake of halving them is, after all, nothing more than a shared illusion based on ego. It didn't seem like Izumu-kun

took Kuchiha-chan's words to heart at all. In the first place, what's the most important thing for people? It's the ability to leave aside the things you don't understand without trying to understand them. In short, that's how it is.

"Hime-chan, where do you want to go?"

"Huh? That's no good. Master, you have a girlfriend, right? If that's the case, then no matter how much Hime-chan wants it, you shouldn't do that. If that is the case, then sleeping in the same room as Hime-chan is no good."

"Huh? I don't have a girlfriend…You're not talking about Kasugai-san, are you? If so, then I'll crush your spirit with my refutations."

"That's not it. Geez, you can't hide it from me. Mii-nee-san told Hime-chan all about it. That Master has a blue haired lover."

"....."

Eh, no way.

Miiko-san, is that how you saw me?

"Hold on… that's a misunderstanding," I said, approaching Hime-chan reflexively. "What… what did you hear? Did Miiko-san say that?"

"Yes… What's with that serious face that I've never seen before? It looks like the face of a demon who got hit by a peashooter."

"It means the attack was too effective…."

I couldn't put power into my voice.

"What the hell…."

Seriously, what the hell?

With an impression like that, what hope is there?

Come to think of it, Kasugai-san also said that it was hopeless or something like that… In that case, did she know about that cold-hearted thing? Did she know and laugh?

".....Is it a misunderstanding?"

"That's right… she's just a friend. Didn't I tell you about it at some point? The girl who's a bit similar to Hime-chan… ah… uwa----"

I wavered.

It's like all of my blood suddenly flowed into my heart.

A scrambled egg.

What surprised me was how surprised I was at the sudden feeling

of depression. It's been a long time since I've been shocked at being misunderstood by another person. Uwa, the *deathless body* and the *Cannibal* and the punctured tires, all of these things that had been monopolizing the priority of my thoughts suddenly became irrelevant to me at an incredible speed.

"…..Master became depressed at mach speed…." Hime-chan drew attention to my poor state. "…..Mii-nee-san's misunderstanding, is it that bad?"

"Hmm….."

"Master, do you like Mii-nee-san?"

"Hmm….."

Getting asked that up front was troubling.

Well, I don't hate her. Right now, it's because of that person's help that I can live honestly in Japan. After forcefully dropping out halfway through the ER3 system and coming back to this country, if I hadn't met Miiko-san and Suzunashi-san in Kyoto, I would've only been able to survive by being taken in by the Kunagisa Syndicate.

But about whether I like or dislike another person.

It's a topic so laughable that I can't laugh.

It's just nonsense.

"Miiko-san is… I owe Miiko-san a debt of gratitude. She's a good person. And she's one of the few I know who has common sense."

"But, Mii-onee-san sometimes walks around with a sword. A serious sword that's not a fake. I can't say that she's a person with common sense."

"Yeah… that's right. I guess so."

"You're iffy." Hime-chan said with a kind of pout that would make my tea muddy. "You're indecisive. If you like it, then shouldn't you just say it?"

"….."

She's young.

I don't envy her.

I think it's miserable.

"People's feelings can be anything… like or dislike, love or hate, I don't think it's a matter of that. It's already out of the question. What

are people's feelings but the accumulation and passing of misunderstandings?"

"……You can keep being cynical and pretending to be a nihilist, Master," Hime-chan said with a sigh, looking down on me. Somehow, it looked like a composed expression. "Master undoubtedly likes Mii-nee-san."

"……"

This time it wasn't a question.

For a moment, the answer was blocked.

Even after a moment, it remained stuck.

Not because… it was too abrupt.

Or because what she said was off the mark.

……If that's the case, then what is it?

Why can't I answer?

It's right, but. It's wrong, but.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

It's fine as long as I answer.

"What… are you saying?" I finally answered Hime-chan. I shouldn't be… shaking. "You keep saying crazy things. Calm down and think about it, it's not like that. Come on, who do you think I am?"

"Surprisingly, it's something you don't know yourself."

In contrast, Hime-chan still looked composed. Composed, but also a little cold.

"It's something you don't realize until other people tell you. You don't know who you like by yourself. Even Hime-chan, until Nanami-san told me of the feelings I held… I didn't notice them at all."

"Such… feelings?"

"The feeling of being in love with someone." Hime-chan chuckled and answered quietly. "Yes. Nanami-san told me to hate him immediately. But that's not logical. You can't fall in love with someone based on logic, and once you like them, you can't easily hate them. I think that it's exactly what as Master said… you can't control your own feelings, you have no control over them."

"Hmm… so there's a person Hime-chan likes."

I was a bit surprised. Although there was no particular basis for it, I always thought that Hime-chan was disconnected from such things. Even if you put aside the past, I didn't think she was suited for that kind of thing, just because of her personality.

"Yes. There is."

With plenty of confidence and a little joy, Hime-chan nodded. When I heard that, it didn't feel too bad. She may have an eccentric side, but Hime-chan also has a cute side.

This girl.

It's not too late.

"Is that so. Then I guess you're also on very good terms with that person," I said, deliberately teasing her. "Since Hime-chan is in love with him, then he's surely cool, smart, manly, kind, and considerate. A man with no faults."

"No." Hime-chan slowly shook her head. "He's an uncool, dumb, and effeminate person who's not kind at all and has not a shred of compassion. He's the kind of person you can't handle."

"But even then, he treasures Hime-chan."

"That person would only see Hime-chan as a stone on the side of the road."

"…..What's so great about someone like that?"

If I were to give my honest opinion as a member of the same sex, I'd say that this guy's nature is one step short of the lowest. I've seen most of the people at the bottom, but I've never heard of a man who's that bad. It's annoying to agree with her, but I understood Nanananami's words.

I don't understand people.

I don't understand a woman's heart.

Even more so that of a young girl.

And if it's a bishoujo, it's impossible to understand.

"That person is so insensitive that I'm sure he'll never notice that Hime-chan likes him for the rest of his life."

"Aren't you going to confess?"

"I can see the result. Hime-chan will never think of telling her feelings for the rest of her life."

"The rest of your life?"

"The rest of my life. No matter what, I absolutely won't waver. I don't want to ruin my current **barely** existing relationship with that person."

"Hmm… that's kind of painful."

"Yes. It's painful." Hime-chan nodded. "But it's not that bad, it's a pain that's strangely comforting. In the past, I used to never think about this kind of thing…."

The past.

The present.

The difference between now… and then.

I guess Hime-chan is changing.

Unlike me.

Step by step, one step at a time, slowly and steadily.

"....."

I'm not jealous.

I only have high hopes.

Rather, I want Hime-chan to achieve it.

What I couldn't do.

What I can't do.

"Hmm." Hime-chan tilted her head. "I've been talking a bit too much, haven't I?"

".....Yeah."

"Master, you're very sensitive like that. It's like you don't like interference in any way, whether it's you doing it or having it done to you. That's why you're attracted to Mii-nee-san who's very good at keeping her distance, isn't it?"

"Hmm… if you say it like that, maybe." The context is different, but it's the same feeling like when I was together with Tomoe-chan some time ago. "Anyway, Miiko-san is a person who's skilled at keeping a good distance. Maybe it's because she does kendo."

"I think that's irrelevant."

Hime-chan laughed.

"I want to go to Kyushu."

"Eh?"

"So, Kyushu. The travel destination. Yeah. Master, if you really don't have a girlfriend, then it's ethically fine."

"Oh… yeah."

Did the conversation return all the way back to that point?

Because it was so abrupt, I was confused.

"But Kyushu is big. Where?"

"Hakata. Um… Yuma-san's hometown."

"....."

Zigzag.

Shisei Yuma.

I was at a loss for words for a moment, but…..

"……I understand. Let's go once I get paid for this part-time job."

And normally, very normally, I nodded.

To the extent that it wasn't unnatural, I should have nodded.

"Thank you."

Hime-chan said.

She was smiling.

At least it looked like a smile.

I looked at that smiling face and didn't smile back.

I don't know how to laugh.

I can't remember anymore.

Somehow, the two of us came to stare at each other.

Awkward.

It's weird.

Being awkward with Hime-chan……

Until now, such a thing was rare---

When.

"Ikki."

There was a knock from the opposite side of the room's door. Shortly after, the door opened and the figure that appeared from the other side was Kuchiha-san. She was wearing oddly fancy cat-like pajamas (are retorts banned?). Her hair gave the impression that she had just finished taking a bath.

Kuchiha-chan spoke over the threshold.

"The shower's open."

"Eh… what about Assistant Professor Kigamine?"

"She already finished. Since she's a night person… I wonder if she'll work after this. But really, she must think I'm a maid or something… She wanted me to do the shower report myself. Anyway, it's your turn to shower. Or are you the sort of man that's fine with it for a day?"

"Ah, no… not particularly..."

It was somewhat difficult.

Since that conversation in the courtyard, we've seen each other at dinner, but this was the first time we've had a proper conversation. I'm grateful to her for breaking up the awkwardness with Hime-chan at the right time, but I can't say that I'm comfortable with Kuchiha-chan either.

"……?" Trying to understand Kuchiha-chan is pointless, but her expression was strange. "Well then… since you're last, you can use it as long as you want. The room is on the first floor… Do you understand?"

"Ah, yeah."

"Sorry, but I don't have any men's clothes for you to change into… It seems like you'd fit by the looks of it, but I don't feel comfortable lending you my shirt. Though, you seem shameless, so you can sleep as you are."

"That's fine."

But don't just casually say that I'm shameless.

"Thank you for the trouble, Kuchiha-chan."

"No, no. Well then."

With a small wave of her hand, Kuchiha-chan closed the door.

Somehow…..

She acted like the conversation in the courtyard never happened.

It's relieving, it's relieving, but… all in all, I don't get this girl.

I turned towards Hime-chan.

Hime-chan was looking at me.

A bit of that awkwardness returned.

".....Well, I'll go wash away my sweat."

"Yes. Can I go to bed first?"

"Yeah. By all means, don't hesitate."

Hime-chan replied awkwardly.

Although it seemed to be as usual.

Although it looked like the usual smile, it wasn't.

Very awkward.

It seemed fleeting.

"……Ah."

Suddenly.

Her eyes looked terribly lonely.

I want that expression to stop.

You're not like me.

It's not too late, you should be able to do your best.

Up to now, you've just had problems with your surroundings… You've not been suffering from a problem that was fundamentally your own like me.

That's why.

I wanted to say something to her.

Really….

Really, only for this girl….

I want to do something.

"……Hey, Hime-chan."

"……Yes?"

"I really like you, Hime-chan."

"……."

"No, you might not think it's persuasive because of my usual habit of saying nasty things, but I'm serious. To be honest, there are some things about Hime-chan that I don't like, but even without Aikawa-san, you have a lot of good qualities. You've helped me a lot in the past, and this time was no different. You've followed me up to this point. Even a defective product like me thinks so, so I'm sure that person that Hime-chan likes will understand your feeling one day. So don't say that you're going to give up before you do it."

"……Right."

Hime-chan looked down.
Her eyes were no longer lonely.
But.
Somewhere, her eyes were sad.
"Hime-chan too… I also like Master. I really, really like Master."
"Yeah, thanks."
"……Well then, good night."
Hime-chan got into the futon.
I left into the hallway.

2

After dinner, since I had a part-time job next week, I asked Assistant Professor Kigamine to give me a quick tour of the building, but since it was originally a clinic that had been remodeled, it looked very different from specialized research facilities, such as the research facility of Shadou Kyouichirou last month. There were at the very least such things as chemicals and equipment, but it felt more like an archive.

Conference room, briefing room, library, WA room. Measuring machine room, laboratory, experiment preparation room, waiting room (the first room that I was guided to), professor's room, assistant professor's room, assistant's room, seminar room (this area was only that in name, it's state was mostly that of a storage room). There was a kitchenette, a bathroom, a changing room next to it, and a shower room in the back. And apparently Kuchiha-chan's room was at the dead end of the first floor (I wasn't shown there, of course). The second floor seemed to be a space for guests like us to stay (formerly two hospital rooms). At this point, I wasn't shown the inside of each room in detail, so I can't say much about them, but it seemed to me that there's not much point in locating so far away from the university. Assistant Professor Kigamine's secondary residence is what it'd be called (incidentally, the primary residence seemed to be an apartment near Shijo Karasuma)... or should it be called Kuchiha-chan's secluded residence?

No… originally, it was a clinic.

That might be more important than I thought. If there is the *experimental body* called Kuchiha-chan, then it would be the domain of human medicine rather than research… Indeed, it's a subject that would make that perverted dissection enthusiast somewhere cry from joy if she heard about it.

"Which reminds me, what is Kokoromi-sensei doing now….." If there's a chance, I'll ask Kunagisa to investigate next time. "Okay."

After finishing the shower, I wiped my wet body with a towel. I

put back on the clothes I took off in the changing room. My hair was just cut by Hime-chan, so it will dry quickly with a hair dryer.

"....."

Hime-chan.

Why did she say that sort of thing?

Why did she ask me that sort of thing?

If I'm asked something, I'll end up thinking about it.

Thinking.

If I get an answer, what will I do….

".....It's nonsense."

Right, nonsense.

It's ridiculous to love someone.

It should be ridiculous.

I've never liked or disliked anyone in my life. I've never loved anyone. I've never hated anyone. I feel nothing for anyone. I don't have anything to do with anyone.

Think that.

Yes, realize that.

I don't care if it's an illusion, just be aware of it.

"......Let's go to bed."

I put the towel I wiped my hair with in the basket and stretched once.

When I got out of the changing room,

"Ah." "Oh."

In the hallway was Assistant Professor Kigamine.

She wasn't in sleeping clothes and her figure was full of energy. It seemed like she'd continue to work after this. Well, this person's appearance in sleep wear is unimaginable. Even the sight of her asleep isn't within the scope of my imagination.

"......How do you do?"

"Good. I had predicted beforehand that I would meet you here."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said.

Again, weren't you surprised just a moment ago?

"Oh? Did you cut your hair?"

"......Eh?"

You didn't notice that?

"And what happened to your cheek?"

"……No, nothing really."

This person……

Really doesn't care about others.

"At any rate, it's a disaster. The tires."

"No, I guess we're in the same boat."

"Let's get some spare tires first thing tomorrow and carry out repairs. You'll have to help me out……"

"Well, it's also my problem. I have some experience, so you can count on me. It's also within the earnings of the part-time job."

"Are you going to bed already?"

"Yeah… I'm not really tired, but my partner was doing her best and is now in fatigue mode. I can't just stay up."

"Is that so… Yukariki-san, right?"

"Yes."

"She's an idiot."

I was told bluntly.

She said it as sharply as a master cutting down his opponent.

…..She probably couldn't tell anyone until now and has been holding back from saying it.

"Right… There's also people like that in this world… I had lost my awareness for just a moment…."

"Hmm…."

Well, Assistant Professor Kigamine is a faculty member at a national university and a scholar. I guess she must not have had a close relationship with an Idiot-chan in her life who couldn't study. Perhaps she's seeing one for the first time.

A gap.

"But Hime-chan is a good girl."

"I'll admit that she's good… but good in what kind of sense? By the way," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "Would you mind talking with me for a bit?"

"Huh… okay, but about what?"

"Did you hear anything from Kuchiha?"

Ah.

I was suddenly cut in a very deep place. Well then, how do I answer… In this case, unlike with the previous question, the mood was different so it would be a bad move to lie. After a moment's hesitation, I decided to answer honestly.

"About her *deathless body* and that I'm similar to Kuchiha-chan and Assistant Professor Kigamine's former mentor… I think."

".....I see. Then this will be quick."

Assistant Professor Kigamine said, lowering her voice.

"Then I want you to continue to stay close to her and watch her. Do you understand?"

".....But Kuchiha-chan is aware of everything."

"I have no intention of hiding it. I'm sure she'll find out after talking with you for a bit anyway… After all, Kuchiha has always completely seen through my schemes."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. That has been completely predicted in advance." Assistant Professor Kigamine continued in a cool, emotionless tone, at least as far as I could observe. "Still… to be honest, I'm at a loss. You could say that the future is a bit dark… That's why I hope that your presence can serve as a catalyst for me… for us."

"*Not dying*....." I said while thinking that this was not the kind of thing to talk about in the middle of a hallway. "What exactly does that mean?"

"I can imagine the gist of what she said… If you ask me, it's just **as it is**, it's exactly **as it is**. To not die. To not die. Too noot diie. The body is always kept at optimal health. In every sense of the word, it doesn't age."

"Doesn't age…."

"She looks roughly 18 years old on the outside… but she's lived at least three times that age."

"Three times!?" Eighteen times three is… "54 year old… that's ridiculous… 54?"

"At minimum. From an arithmetic point of view, it would be wise to think that she has lived three times more than that."

Three times that…

162 years old.

What… is that.

It's too ridiculous to deny or shake off.

"Three times… why is it three times? What's the basis for that first 'minimum' line?"

"She seems to be able to remember only **about that far back**… If we follow the theory that brain cells are ROM rather than RAM, it means that you can't waste brain cells… You could say that's the root of her peculiar, lazy personality. Fufufu, at this point, there's already an impossibility in that hypothesis, isn't there? Incidentally, the one who was *in charge* of her before me, my mentor, said she was roughly 800 years old."

"Eight hundred… isn't that Yao Bikuni2?"

"Do you think it's possible?"

"Eh?"

"What do you think? In all, a person who's lived for nearly ten centuries… Do you think such a person can exist?"

"Hmm. I think it's impossible, but…."

I know it's impossible, but....

I told Assistant Professor Kigamine what I told Hime-chan a short while ago. Cells with perfect regenerative and reproductive capabilities. A metabolism that repeats itself forever. Of course, not forgetting to mention that these are *the thoughts of a layman.* However, Assistant Professor Kigamine just shrugged saying, "You say some interesting things."

"But the very premise of *a cell with perfect regenerative and replicative capabilities* is a contradiction in itself. In the first place, *death* itself is programmed within the genes of our cells."

"....."

"In the cellular sense, it's apoptosis… No matter whatever state of health you maintain, extending your lifespan only increases the chance of activating the cancer factors that are fundamentally incorporated within genes. It's not a simple copy error of a cell, each cell dies naturally according to its role. That's what is meant by *if*

you're alive, you will surely die. Death is already part of the prerequisites of life."

"....."

Romanticism that will never come true, or opportunism as an escape from reality. Is this what the two sentences prefaced by Shiogi-chan as "idle gossip" mean? An absolute contradiction that blindly ignores theory.

"In the end, it's a paradox in terms of which comes first, growth or evolution… a paradox, huh. Fufu." At the word *paradox,* Assistant Professor Kigamine just laughed. "But between the strongest spear and the strongest shield, the spear would obviously win."

"How?"

"Shields are tools to parry spears, but a spear is a tool to pierce a person. They're not tools made to penetrate shields… *resisting*[3] really is an accurate expression. But you know what? Even if it's an exaggeration to say that apoptosis is programmed into each cell, *death* is only a step to the next *life*. It is just a step… then isn't *not dying* synonymous with *not living*?"

"....."

"Paradoxically, if such a legendary existence that was immortal in the strictest sense actually existed, it would be troublesome. In the first place, if cells were immortal, then people wouldn't be able to finish growing. The program would keep repeating and repeating and multiply to infinity for all eternity. That's just a cancer cell. That individual will just keep growing infinitely larger and larger… a giant like a black hole would be created… No, it will be the birth of a giant that will be **forever incomplete**. After all, the cells will never perish either automatically or passively, unless you have the ability to freely and arbitrarily control the life and death of a cell, but that is God's domain."

"Well, I agree…."

Growth and evolution.

A paradox.

"Furthermore, there is also the question of where to get enough energy to guarantee such growth… Energy, in the grand scheme of

things, is synonymous with life."

"....It is."

Somehow… I was at a loss for words.

If Assistant Professor Kigamine, who is supposed to be studying immortality, who should be studying Kuchiha-chan, has fatally denied the very thing itself, I don't know what position to take. At the moment, I didn't have a firm foothold.

As usual, Assistant Professor Kigamine didn't seem to be bothered by my confusion and continued her monologue without paying any attention to me as if she was talking to herself. "But you know," she said. "…..Fufu, you might think it's humorous to see a biologist say such childish things, but I think these things are fundamental. Yes, when thinking about the most basic and binary principles… what exactly is *death*?"

"…..*Death* is…."

Not living.

Not being able to meet anyone.

Not being able to talk with anyone.

Not being able to feel anything.

Not being able to think about anything.

Generally speaking.

"I guess it must be nothing."

"……."

I remembered the question Kuchiha-chan asked me.

What does it mean to *not die*?

She had a hard time with my vague answer, and then she answered herself saying, "not dying means never changing."

Then what is *death*?

"*Death* means nothingness forever and ever and ever. To put it strongly, it's darkness… isn't it? It's to be alone in the darkness with no prospects, without any news, and nothing to rely on."

"You're a poet."

"I'm just a user of nonsense."

"I appreciate your poetic sensibility, but… I think it's a bit more dull… Let's see, for example, the popular image that if a person's heart

stops beating, they die. But since the heart is an involuntary muscle, it has nothing to do with the human will, to be precise."

"It's Kosakai Fuboku."

"What's that?"

Assistant Professor Kigamine responded with a question.

Apparently she didn't know.

"There's a novel like that. It's a mystery novel…."

"You read strange books."

She looked at me with doubting eyes.

Well, that's true.

"There's a long established theory that your spirit dwells within the heart, did you know that? Since ancient times, people thought that humans think with their hearts. That was before the existence of the brain was discovered…."

"That wouldn't necessarily be a mistake. It's the heart that pumps blood to the brain and the brain doesn't move the heart."

It's the heart that's pounding.

It's also the heart that grows cold.

It's also the heart that is being tested.

"Yes… and **even the movement of the heart has nothing to do with** death. *Death*, the distinguisher known as *death* isn't caused by an abnormality in the brain or the five internal organs… **rather, it's normal**. **If you live normally, you'll die normally**. Because otherwise, you can't live. Then what is her existence?"

If it's not normal, it's abnormal.

If it's not regular, it's irregular

"**She knows herself**… that's what I think," I said. "**That's why you called me**."

"Exactly."

"But if you can allow me to express my selfish stance, I don't think you can understand yourself on your own. It feels like Kuchiha-chan doesn't know anything either."

"Yeah… sure, maybe. However," Assistant Professor Kigamine said. "At the very least it seems that Professor Saitou… managed to grasp *something* about her."

"Saitou…."

Their former mentor who I'm said to resemble.

According to them, I'm just like him.

"....A rebellion against causality. A revolution against the existent destiny. A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come,"Assistant Professor continued as she chanted. "Those are… in the first place, that person's, Professor Saitou's words. At the time, when I received his instruction, I was an ordinary senior high school student… Yes, I was about the age of Yukariki-san."

"Oh, a senior high school student?"

"I took over his research… **I continued to follow after him, but**… Honestly, it's a heavy burden to bear. Kuchiha doesn't open to me at all… This isn't the first time I used this kind of **calculating approach** of bringing someone like you in."

"....."

"But that's failed every single time."

"...Kuchiha-chan said that there was a shortage of human resources."

"Yes… from Kuchiha's point of view, my plots, or rather, my existence must certainly be humorous. But, however, this time, this time… I might succeed."

"Why?"

"Until now, Kuchiha has completely ignored my plans when she realized what I was up to." Assistant Professor Kigamine's words were self-deprecating. "This time, there is a sliver of hope."

"A sliver… is it?"

"Yes… I've been continuing after the professor for a long time, but… I'm getting pretty tired. This is the first time Kuchiha has participated knowing that there was a plan, knowing that there would be obstacles. It looks like the aptitude test worked too. That is to say, there was meaning in holding it here."

"....."

The first time?

Kuchiha-chan herself said it like that.

The interests are aligned, she said.

At the very least, based on Assistant Professor Kigamine's side of the story, Kuchiha-chan isn't cooperating with the research at all. In fact, even this time, I can't really tell how many falsehoods or calculations were included in what she said. But still, this is a very strange case.

"I… Kigamine Yaku, want to pursue every hope by any means necessary… for the sake of defeating fate."

"For the sake of… carving out my own destiny."

Carving out your destiny.

Destroying causality.

Collapsing… the Story.

"…..It's my job, so I'll obey if ordered," I said. "I'm not very good at deceiving serious people with a purpose."

"There's no need to deceive me."

"……Is that so…. It seems that the conversation is over, so can I go already?"

"Huh?"

"I think I understand why Kasugai-san was so rude to you and ran away from here. If anything… it might be *because of Kuchiha-chan*."

"….What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Even if there is a meaning, there's no guarantee that the meaning will have any meaning. Once you get to the meaning of the meaning of the meaning of the meaning, it's no longer a matter of human knowledge."

"…..If you think it's inhumane to use Kuchiha as an *experimental subject*, then you're off the mark," Assistant Professor Kigamine calmly said. "Her possession of a *deathless body* makes her socially vulnerable. I don't know what would happen if people were to find out. Somebody… must protect her."

Strong is weak, weak is strong.

A *deathless body*.

Having people be cautious of you, being regarded as dangerous.

And probably…..

Being killed.

Being slaughtered in every way.

"She doesn't have the ability to protect herself."

I don't affect anyone.

I needed a place to live and someone to take care of me.

A deathless body.

Death.

The strength of a person who can commit suicide.

"…..I don't think it's inhumane. I mean, it's a little late for that, considering my life… but maybe…."

"Maybe?"

"No, that's an exaggeration."

That's it.

This is talking too much.

I don't have that right.

Because… I'm not concerned.

"Good night, Assistant Professor Kigamine."

"….Yeah. See you tomorrow."

Assistant Professor Kigamine walked down the hallway without saying anything more to me. Is it the laboratory or the library in that direction? Anyway, she's probably going to do research work all night. Kuchiha-chan said she was a night person, but on the contrary, it looked like she worked all day long. From the point of view of a lazy person such as myself, it was something I really admired.

It's something admirable.

But… maybe Kasugai-san didn't evaluate Assistant Professor Kigamine that way.

The research she was doing while working at the Shadou Kyouichirou research facility, which had been completely destroyed by Kunagisa Tomo and Utsurigi Gaisuke last month, was incredibly significant, but not something to be praised.

However.

If I had asked her at the time, "Why would you do that?" She would have replied.

"Because it's work."

In accordance with that….

Assistant Professor Kigamine isn't someone to look up to.

That person isn't working.

That person is on a mission.

But that probably wasn't what disturbed Kasugai-san. Kasugai-san doesn't have the temperament to be distrubed by such things. That person… she doesn't feel anything for anyone, she's not dead because she's not alive, she's someone **from that side**.

But.

After being separated from Professor Kyouichirou….

There is no one to tell her what to do now.

There is no one to give her orders now.

In that sense, Kasugai-san is probably unstable at the moment. Her future actions are unpredictable. All together unpredictable.

Capricious.

A personality like a rolling dice.

Truly, she's just like me.

"....Akari-san, how are you doing…."

Turning my thoughts in a completely harmless direction, I decided to return to my room.

"Ah… laying in Akari-san's lap… That's right, when this part-time job is over, I'll go to that island again together with Tomo… I thought I'd never go there again."

I wish it didn't have that fortune teller.

I walked down the hallway for a while, touching my hair, which had dried up while I was talking with Assistant Professor Kigamine, and was about to climb up the stairs when Rizumu-chan came down from above. The stairs in this lab are so narrow that only one person can pass through at a time. I stopped and waited for Rizumu-chan to descend.

".....Hey Rizu…"

"....."

"Mu-chan?"

No.

Like Hime-chan, she was in a long t-shirt borrowed from Kuchiha-

chan… Right now, both of her arms were out in the open. Long arms slenderly stretching out. Two legs extending from the hem of the shirt.

Not even a manteau.

Not even a straightjacket.

She had no expression.

It wasn't Rizumu-chan's innocent smile.

It wasn't even Izumu-kun's outrageous smile.

She had no expression.

She said nothing.

She who said nothing.

Who is she who said nothing, I didn't know.

He who said nothing.

Who is he who said nothing, I didn't know.

Which one?

Which is the *life* of this body?

Which is the *death* of this body?

I didn't know at all.

An inconsistency.

Which one of the two is inconsistent?

"Um… is it Izumu-kun?"

While I couldn't tell whether it was *he* or *she*, she went down the stairs and walked past me.

Soon after, the figure disappeared into the darkness.

That direction is… the waiting room? Or is it the front door? She didn't have the kind of atmosphere where it seemed like she decided to treat herself to a stroll in the middle of the night. So then where does she want to go? That direction is the opposite from the bathroom. Is she still half asleep? The look on her face was of one who was half asleep, and rather than ignoring me, it was like she didn't even notice me.

But I guess it wasn't that nuanced.

It was like she was sleepwalking.

What's that?… Does she also have a third personality?

No way, I've never heard of that.

Besides… it didn't seem like it was a dimension of her personality

or anything like that, it was more like a complete transformation.

As if.

As if the personality had left.

Empty.

That's how she looked.

Empty, like well-lit darkness.

"....."

I considered chasing after her for a moment, but the thought of getting involved made my legs stop moving.

It's not like I didn't consider the worst case scenario.

That it was Izumu-kun's side and that he might be going to slaughter Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, his *targets*, right now. They're the only two people on the first floor….

….But.

Even if it is the worst case, it's something unrelated to me.

There's no reason to defend them.

If I get in the way, Izumu-kun will kill me without mercy. That's the duty of a *professional killer*. In accordance with his reason for being, he will kill me.

I don't want to get involved.

Besides, Izumu-kun promised me.

He wouldn't kill people in places connected to me.

If you think about it, that's an extraordinary deal. All I needed to do was keep company with a cute girl like Rizumu-chan. There are a heap of problems, but if it's just getting along, that mountain can be avoided. You don't have to climb a mountain just because there is one. So… that's the talent of leaving things you don't know as they are.

I climbed the stairs.

I went back to my room and opened the door. The lights were off. Looking at the bed, Hime-chan was asleep deep inside the futon. That's convenient. Even if Hime-chan is my partner, I don't want her to see my sleeping face. I'd still be able to sleep soundly, but somehow

I'd feel different.

I got into my futon.

It's been a rough day… Oh, I forgot that I was going to contact Kasugai-san and Miiko-san. Well, it's too much of a bother now. I mean, that person will be fine and return to the apartment. Those who can live by themselves should live by themselves. Those who can't live by themselves will only get hurt if they live alone. But if you have to, that's just the way it is.

"Sleep."

I closed my eyes.

The next time I opened my eyes, I saw hell.

CHAPTER 7 — BATTLEFIELD (THOUSAND PAPER CRANE)

0

If you don’t have bread, then starve to death.

1

Sometimes I wish I could go back in time.

That is to say, it would be a question like this.

"If you could redo your life, from where and from what point in time would you want to start over?"

The model answer is simple and clear.

I don’t want to start over. I want to die soon.

My answer is the same.

Hypothetically, even if you could go back in time.

For example, even if time turned back to before I met that young blue boy, I would probably still repeat the same things I did after I had met that young blue boy. No matter how many times I start over, and no matter how many times I start over again, the exact same tragedy would endlessly repeat itself. Like a video recorded on media that will never degrade, following the same program as if it were sick.

Even if I went back to before my sister died.

Even if I went back to before I was born.

I would forever repeat the same thing over and over again.

As if it were dictated by the story of destiny.

As if submitting to someone’s will.

The cause is different, but the result is the same.

But I think.

Even if it’s called childish, even if it’s called foolish.

Even if it’s called nonsense, even if it’s called a masterpiece.

I wish I could go back in time.

Before I had felt like this.

At that time, it was better than it was now.

There’s not a single thing harsher than the future.

If there’s a god governing fate, then I’ll pray.

I'm asking you, please don't do a thing anymore.

Stay still where you are.

"....Ah, I had a strange dream. "

The sunlight shining through the gap in the curtains woke me up.

I had a strange dream, but I've already forgotten it. However, for once it's not my memory's fault; it's like that for most people. Even if you try to remember them, most dreams are forgotten.

……..

How do we know that?

Even though we should have forgotten them.

"Maybe, in fact, we only forget a little… I don't really know."

I also don't really understand this train of thought I'm having while I'm waking up.

Why am I even thinking about that?

I glanced over at the other bed.

It seems Hime-chan is still sleeping. Even though she should be taking supplementary classes right now, she's quite laid back. But it'll take some time to repair the Fiat, so I guess there's no helping it for this morning. Rather, the fact that she hasn't skipped a single lesson until now is something of a miracle.

Even with all that she says, I guess she must really love school.

I left the room, being careful not to make any noise and wake her up. If possible, I'd like to go wash my face in order to refresh myself, but… I guess the sink in the changing room is fine. The first thing that came to mind was the sink in the bathroom, but if I had to choose that thing, then I'd rather not choose at all.

I came down to the first floor and went straight to the changing room.

I was still a bit half asleep. My vision, or rather my thoughts were kind of hazy. I don't have low blood pressure, in fact, I'm quite good at waking up. I'm good, but... recently, because of Kasugai-san, I haven't been sleeping well lately. I should find a place where I can sleep alone soon… or maybe I'll just stay at Kunagisa's place for a week or so. If it's her, then I'm completely fine with having someone

next to me when I sleep.

I knocked on the changing room's door, but there was no response, so I opened the door and went in. When I entered… everything was fine before I walked in, it was like walking down Hirao Street, but as I went in…

I had a strange intuition.

".....Hmm? "

Somehow.

I felt like I had to keep going and look at the shower room in the back. I wondered why I had this weird feeling. It was a strange intuition, but actually it wasn't strange at all. It wasn't something concrete, it was more of a vague, fragile certainty,

The air was wet[4].

The air was dry[5].

Intuition?

Or maybe, empiricism.

I'm not really sure.

I'm not really sure, but…..

Is it because I've just woken up?

I'm not really sure, but…..

I'm not really sure.

Or maybe, empiricism.

Intuition?

The air was wet.

The air was dry.

"....."

There's no need to forcefully stop yourself from seeing what you want to see, what you want to see of your own free will. However, even with that understanding, I still decided to wash my face in order to make my head as clear as possible before finally opening the door to the shower room.

There, the girl who could not die was dead.

She was dead to the point where she couldn't be anything more than that.

She was dead to the point where you couldn't stand to look at her.

Her upper half and her lower half were cut through, and the guts that were packed inside were leaking out. Her organs must have lost oxygen a while ago, as they had turned into a reddish-black color. Living organs are very red, red and sparkling. The *things* coming out of Kuchiha-chan's upper body were, no matter how you look at it, completely lusterless and dead organs.

Loosely, loose enough that no sound would leak out to the changing room, water was flowing out of the shower... The smell of blood was faint. That must have washed away all the blood which should have spilled out onto the floor tiles.

The thing which had called me.

The faint sound of the shower and...

The slight smell of blood.

So that was it.

The wetness, the dryness.

Here it's….

Already over.

"Ah, ugh….."

I sealed my mouth.

I held back the scream that was about to leak out.

I immediately returned from my half-asleep state.

Reality?

A dream?

Which one… is this?

The body that appeared to have been ripped in half was... connected, but only slightly. By one vertebral column, and one layer of skin, it was connected.

Flashback.

The various corpses I've seen so far passed through my mind.

But even compared to them, this one was of an awful category.

Truly of an awful category.

It was as if the organs were...

It felt like the internal organs had been devoured.

The expression.

The expression on Kuchiha-chan's face.

The expression on Kuchiha-chan's face, the expression that I could see from here… I couldn't understand what it was. It wasn't distorted by pain, but... obviously, it wasn't calm either. If I had to say, it was blank.

It was blue and cold.

Her eyes were closed.

Both her arms and legs were spread out.

Her fists weren't clenched.

Her clothes were the same as from last night, those fancy cat pajamas.

The cat was completely black.

The cat.

The cat, the cat, the cat.

The blood had solidified and turned all black.

Black, black, black, black, black, black, black.

Black.

A black cat.

A cat-like black.

"Umm……." I asked the person who should be there. "What is this? This… these kinds of things are troublesome for me….."

I took one step back.

It was too sudden.

I took a second step back.

My comprehension couldn't keep up.

I took a third step back.

Calm down.

I took four steps back and left the shower room.

I closed the door.

I can't see anything.

Now I can’t see anything.

I don’t know anything.

"…….!"

I rushed towards the sink and, with all the strength in my body, twisted the faucet. The water rushed out of the faucet with such force that it was almost overwhelming. I took some in my hands and washed my face. That’s right, I came here to wash my face. I came here to wash my face. I came here to wash my face. Huh? Didn’t I just wash it earlier? It’s fine, it’s not like it'll hurt to do it again. Wash wash wash wash wash. I love cleanliness. I love cleanliness. Keep it clean. Fastidiously clean.

Become calm.

Become cruel.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha....."

I’m suffocating.

It’s hard to breath.

Did I drink the water?

No, I forgot to breathe.

Am I an idiot? I’m going to die.

"Ugh..."

Leaving the water running, I escaped out of the changing room and crouched down in the hallway.

I quickly realized and closed the door.

"Ughhh……."

How… did it get to this point?

What is this development?

Why is Kuchiha-chan dead?

Ah, that’s right. Maybe it’s a grand scheme to surprise me. Kuchiha-chan has a *body that cannot die*. She wouldn’t die from having her organs pulled out. Surely, right now, she’s going to open the door and say something like, "Surprise! Hahaha, I really scared you".

Her guts still sticking out.

With a blank expression on her face.

She’d appear.

".....Ah"

I remembered.

Last night, I saw Rizumu-chan… or was it Izumu-kun, I don't know which, but it was the undivided *Cannibal*.

The professional killer.

The one whose job is to kill.

I'm sure if I asked they would answer like this.

"Because it is work."

Work must be accomplished.

Accomplishing work isn't the important thing.

Work has to deliver results.

With an unsteady head, I forced myself to stand up.

With an unsteady body, I pushed myself up.

"Assistant Professor… Kigamine"

Is where?

Is she safe?

A night owl… She said she was going to work. So… the laboratory or the library, I think she walked in that direction. If my memory is correct. I hope that my memory is correct, but, if my memory is correct, my memory has never been correct even once.

Memory?

I want to forget all this as soon as possible.

I only remember things I don't like.

I only remember people I don't like.

I only know things I don't like.

I only know people I don't like.

"Not dead… not dead."

I walked down the hallway.

The first room was the laboratory.

I knocked. Knocking is important. After all, that's proper manners. It's rude if you don't follow manners. Rude and impolite. You'll get scolded. I don't want to get scolded. And if you knock, what a surprise, you'll clarify whether someone is inside or not. Knocking possesses all of these excellent advantages. There's no situation where it won't work.

But there was no response.

I twisted the knob.

It was locked.

There was no response and it was locked.

In other words, there's no one inside.

"....."

Does that mean there's no one alive?

Without taking time to think, I hit the door with my shoulder. With all my might and without any mercy for the door or for myself. Without a fragment of care.

After five times, the door creaked, tilted, and a gap opened. That's when I felt all the pain. I don't care. I'm always in pain. I always get hurt. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts.

Undoubtedly.

"....."

There was really no one inside.

That's obvious.

If there was someone inside, and that person was dead, and the room was locked, that would make it a locked room, wouldn't it? Realistically, that kind of thing is impossible. Impossible things can't happen.

Of course.

I touched my shoulder.

The bone was fine, it wasn't broken.

That's strange. How is it not broken?

Tilting my head, I advanced further into the hall.

The library.

I knocked. Knocking is important. After all, that's proper manners. It's rude if you don't follow manners. Rude and impolite. You'll get scolded. I don't want to get scolded. And if you knock, what a surprise, you'll clarify whether someone is inside or not. Knocking possesses all of these excellent advantages. There's no situation where it won't work.

But there was no response.

I twisted the knob.

It wasn't locked.

There, Assistant Professor Kigamine was dead.

She was sitting in a chair, her body slumped against a desk. Her eyes were facing towards me, but they were cloudy. Those were dead eyes. She wasn't alive. Certainly. There was nothing that could be done. With a hundred percent certainty.

She was dead.

Human necks don't bend at such an angle.

And one more thing.

Her right shoulder had been completely ripped off.

There were traces of her blood having gushed out.

It had already almost stopped flowing out.

It had already almost hardened.

Red-black and hardened.

Or... did it run out?

This smell.

I didn't notice it.

Why is that?

Was it because it was sealed?

The smell of blood.

The smell of death was sealed.

Now it was no longer sealed.

Death… has been released.

"....."

I tried to get closer, but I hesitated.

I felt like if I got any closer, I would be trapped.

It wasn't fear.

It wasn't shock.

This feeling… it's bad.

Right now, I was fascinated.

Death, death, death, death, death, death.

Madoka Kuchiha's corpse.

Kigamine Yaku's corpse.

I was fascinated by those two.

I was attracted to them. Attracted to them. Uncontrollably, without limit. An attraction with a force strong enough to draw together two massive objects across an enormous distance was physically pulling me towards them.

This is… yearning.

I was yearning for it.

"Uh. Ughhh"

This time it wasn't one step at a time.

I moved four steps back at once and closed the door.

The smell disappeared.

A former clinic. I see, it has that kind of structure.

Completely sealed.

Death was once again completely sealed.

"How, how did it come to this point?"

If Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan are dead, then the part-time job won't happen, right? Even though it begins next week. Does that mean Miiko-san won't be able to get her hanging scroll? Isn't that the problem here? I understand that. That kind of thing, I understand.

Do you think I don't even understand that kind of thing?

I thought.

"I-Izumu-kun…."

That was the only thing I could think about now.

He did this.

A professional killer.

What a thing, that liar.

He told me he wouldn't kill anyone in front of me.

It's laughable, what a fool.

Did I believe in what a professional killer said?

Don't say, after all that, that you were betrayed.

Don't say that you believed him up until now.

Isn't that what you thought?

That tomorrow, those two could be dead.

That still, it doesn't involve you.

That's what you thought, right?

Why are you surprised with things going as you had predicted?

Rejoice, your predictions were right.

"**Shut up!**"

I ran down the hall.

I should have been running straight, but I ran into things left and right. I ran into the wall, I ran into the corners, I ran into door knobs here and there, and tripped where there was nothing.

It was pathetic.

"**Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up**… Be quiet! I'm normal!"

I arrived at the stairs.

I climbed.

There, taking my time.

One step at a time, one step at a time.

I climbed like I was chewing.

"**I didn't predict anything I didn't think anything I didn't feel anything I didn't think about anything I didn't rush anything I didn't regret anything I**"

I finished climbing the stairs.

Once more, I ran.

I stopped in front of the room where Rizumu-chan was sleeping.

This time, I didn't knock.

"……Izumu-kun!"

On the bed.

The Niounomiya siblings were dead.

"Huh?"

Snap, I heard a crack forming in my head.

Snap, snap, snap.

Crack.

I was already at my maximum limit.

My brain started to run away.

Has it already started?

That's no good, at this rate.

It's going to get away. I can't catch up.

"……Eeeh?"

Her body on the bed was…

Bloodstained.

Bloodstained.

Bloodstained.

As expected, the blood turned into a reddish-black color.

That's natural.

The neck was torn off.

At the neck, the head and the body were split into two.

Completely, without letting a single layer of skin connect them, it was complete.

A headless corpse.

Just that was enough, it was more than enough.

There was a large wound at the base of the chest, as if it had been drilled through.

The t-shirt borrowed from Kuchiha-chan was destroyed and, in the depths, in the place where the heart should have been, there was a big, big, big, big, deep, deep, deep, deep… wound.

More than a wound, it was a hole.

It went through.

Her head was cut off.

Her chest was pierced through.

She had been killed twice.

Well, that's right.

There were two personalities.

Twice.

You'd have to kill twice.

It doesn't count as having died, right?

"I love you!"

And.

I remembered Rizumu-chan's smile.

"Gyahahaha!"

And.

I remember Izumu-kun's laugh.

Please stop.

I don't want to remember that kind of thing.

Please stop please stop please stop.

"Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun Rizumu-chan Izumu-kun…..?"

What's the point of calling out to them?

I know there will be no answer.

No, I don't know. How would I know?

I don't want to understand, I don't want to break.

Please respond.

You… you should be a feared professional killer, right?

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

They wouldn't die from having their head cut off and their chest pierced.

You won't die, right? There's no way you can die.

Even if you try to surprise me, it's not going to happen.

Because I'm used to having people die.

At this point.

At this point, that kind of thing won't surprise me.

In the corner of the room, there was the manteau and the straightjacket, folded and left behind. Huh, straitjackets can be folded like that. That seems like quite a difficult structure to fold.

Really.

"…..Hey, Rizumu-chan…."

No response.

"…..Hey, Izumu-kun……."

No response.

Let's calm down.

I'm cool.

First, choose. Your actions from now on, choose them. Should I sort out this situation, or should I stay confused? The latter is clearly the easier choice. Choosing that would surely be the correct choice. But I chose the former. Certainly, I was confused.

Madoka Kuchiha was dead.

Assistant Professor Kigamine was dead.

The Niounomiya siblings were dead.

There's probably a connection there.

That's right, everyone is dead.

Everyone was killed.

A common point.

Like that, the chain of deaths connected.

"…..**And.**"

I knew two things.

I understood Kuchiha-chan and Assistant Professor Kigamine.

They were the *professional killer*'s targets.

Targets are killed.

That's the rule.

That's common sense.

At minimum, it's courtesy.

*"***But… why is Izumu-kun….***"*

Or why is Rizumu-chan.

Dead.

I don't understand.

I don't need to understand.

"…….I need to flee."

I have to wake up Hime-chan and flee.

The Fiat is no good, so I'll use the bicycle.

We don't need to go over the mountain.

Somewhere.

At least, somewhere that isn't here.

This place is… no good.

This place is already finished.

I removed the Niounomiya siblings from my field vision and left the room. I opened the door to the next hospital room. I didn't knock. I didn't have the time to think about that. What is knocking?

"Ichihime! Wake up!" I rushed over to the bed and shook Hime-chan who was still in her futon. "We're going to escape from here… things have become… a… mess"

I noticed something strange.

My hand that tried to shake her sank.

This isn't the elasticity of a human body.

"……!?"

I lifted up the futon.

Inside, there was a futon.

The futon was wearing a futon.

"……"

A futon.

No matter how you look at it, it's a futon. Without any subterfuge, a splendid futon. A person not calling that a futon would have a screw loose. If your head is normal, then your eyes are strange. If your eyes are fine, then your head is strange. Anyway, I think something is strange.

No.

But I'm strange.

I must be abnormal.

I don't possess any normality.

".....Huh?"

I tilted my head.

"Where's Hime-chan?"

Where is Hime-chan?

2

Hime-chan was dead in the courtyard.

Both arms were… torn off at the elbow.
And the neck was twisted in an impossible direction.
She was dead in a pool of blood.
There was no smile there.
There was no hope there.
"....."
Pieces of meat.
The smell of blood. A pool of blood.
Where, where was this much blood in that small body?
Plenty.
Drifting about.
Her small body seemed to be floating in it.
Bones. Spinal fluid? Bones peeking out. Arms.
Where are the arms? The torn arms.
Chopped in pieces, soaked in blood, here and there.
Chunks of meat.
Slices of meat.
A twisted neck.
Eyes without life. Eyes without sparks.
Her pupils were open as if they had seen evil itself, but her eyes weren't twisted in fear nor frozen in grief, they were empty.
Her ribbon was untied.
The hair she was growing was disturbed.
Cruel, cruel, cruel.
Uniform.
Her still new uniform was torn everywhere.
It looked like she was attacked by a beast.
Like she was trampled over by a mythical beast.
Trampled over.
Conquered. Desecrated.

Sacrifice, prey, gluttony.

Disgrace. Destruction, destruction, destruction.

Murder. Assassination. Blood, meat, bone, blood, meat, meat.

Pieces of meat. The smell of blood. A puddle of blood. Where, where was this much blood in that small body? Plenty. Drifting about. Her small body seemed to be floating in it. Bones. Spinal fluid? Bones peeking out. Arms. Where are the arms? The torn arms. Chopped in pieces, soaked in blood, here and there. Chunks of meat. Slices of meat. A twisted neck. Eyes without life. Eyes without sparks. Her pupils were open as if they had seen evil itself, but her eyes weren't twisted in fear nor frozen in grief, they were empty. Her ribbon was untied. The hair she was growing was disturbed. Cruel, cruel, cruel. Uniform. Her still new uniform was torn everywhere. It looked like she was attacked by a beast. Like she was trampled over by a mythical beast. Trampled over. Conquered. Desecrated. Sacrifice, prey, gluttony. Disgrace. Destruction, destruction, destruction. Murder. Assassination. Blood, meat, bone, blood, meat, meat.

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Yukariki Ichihime.

Yukariki Ichihime's upbringing was ordinary.

Normal, and a little unusual.

It was a plain, ordinary story.

Unfortunately, this wasn't a story that can satisfy both bad taste and evil curiosity. This wasn't a story that could be told and listened to. Even if you strained your ears to listen, this wasn't a story that can be made clear.

The story itself was a common one.

There was nothing new, no surprising development.

It was moderately misfortunate.

It was moderately tragic.

It was moderately cruel.

But Yukariki Ichihime was not a moderate girl.

Therefore, it was very misfortunate.

Therefore, it was very tragic.

Therefore, it was very cruel.

Being saved by Aikawa Jun.

Receiving training from Shisei Yuma.

And yet, for her it was still misfortunate, tragic, and cruel.

It doesn't change.

Essentially, nothing changes.

The incident in June was caused by her own lack of moderation, after all. If she had been just a bit more moderate, such a tragedy wouldn't have happened. Yes, let's admit it. Let's admit it, let's admit it.

Yukariki Ichihime was by no means a victim.

You could even say she was the perpetrator.

Maybe she was of a different kind, peculiar, and grotesque.

Her bright smile was a deception.

Her bright words were hypocrisy.

Her bright posture was a disguise.

Her bright atmosphere was a fabrication.

Everything was artificial and hopelessly distorted.

Maybe she was of a different kind, peculiar, and grotesque.

Maybe she was the perpetrator.

"But… even then, what is this?"

Inside the pool of blood.

Drifting about as if eaten and scattered.

Losing both of her reliable arms.

Losing all thoughts and desires and wishes and prayers.

Hollow, empty eyes.

That expression.

That figure.

Is she not a victim?

I gazed upon it from afar.

I took my phone out of my pocket.

I pressed the buttons I remembered.

"Ah… It's me."

I said as the phone connected.

"People… are dead."

"And?"

A voice answered on the other side of the phone.

"People died."

"And?"

"Including me, there were five people… when I woke up this morning, four of them were dead."

"And?"

"Everyone is dead except me."

"And?"

"I want to escape, but I'm up in the mountains… All the cars were destroyed….."

"And?"

"Please help me."

"Understood. Wait there. Don't do anything at all. Don't contact the police or anywhere else. Leave it to boku-sama-chan."

"Okay… later."

I hung up the phone.

I also turned off the power.

Then, I walked up to Hime-chan, one step at a time.

Already… I don't remember anyone anymore.

Assistant Professor Kigamine, Kuchiha-chan.

The Niounomiya, Rizumu-chan, Izumu-kun.

All of it disappeared and flew away.

I erased everything.

I consumed it.

"……Sorry, Hime-chan."

I stepped into the pool of blood.

It was still not completely dry and it made a splashing sound. My shoes were dirty. Dirty? Do I want to say that they're dirty because they have human blood on them? It's blood. It's part of a human. Do I want to insult that?

It doesn't matter.

Gently, I held Hime-chan.

Preserving the scene, why would I care about that?

"Aaaaah……"

Hime-chan is dead.

Dead.

"I've always caused trouble for you… I feel bad for always involving you in all this… even now. It's true. It's true. It's true. It's not a lie."

I muttered to myself creepily.

This guy, what is he talking about?

But I didn't stop talking.

I couldn't control myself.

"For Hime-chan, it was only the beginning……."

"Master."

I remembered when Hime-chan said.

"When do you feel happy?"

"……….?" I didn't get the point of the question and tilted my head like a fool. "Uh... sorry, but I don't really understand your question."

"Sooooo. At what times, in which moments do you feel happy to be alive?"

"I think that living together with three older maids in a four-tatami apartment would be happiness, but I've had no such experience."

"If you had you'd get the death penalty."

"Being executed seems a little overboard."

"It's a thought crime."

"Just that……? But happiness, huh… I've never thought about that. I don't think I can have it, and I don't think I particularly want to have it."

"You don't think so?"

"I'm fine being that way. I just want to have a normal life, go to college, get along with the people around me, get a part-time job once in a while, go on vacations and so on. That's all I need. I don't need anything in particular. I don't want anything in particular."

"Hmm. You don't have something you want, something personal? Some people answered that they would be happy if there was world peace."

"I don't care about the world. Thinking about the world, can the world make me happy? That's completely laughable. Right now, I'm only thinking about the present. Isn't that fine? There's no need to worry about winning the lottery, or achieving great financial success, or fulfilling an old dream. If today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow I and the people around me can manage to continue living properly, then don't you think that's fine?"

"Hmm. Ah, I see"

Hime-chan smiled.

A charming smile.

"So that's what makes Master happy."

Happiness.

Apparently that's happiness.

What's that?

What does that mean?

What are you saying?

I don't have such a thing.

Even an ordinary one wouldn't suit me.

It's already been too late for me since long ago.

However, Hime-chan isn't me.

Unlike me, Hime-chan had a future. Finally, she had something ahead of her. Finally, she could see the things which had not yet come. After all this time, Hime-chan should have finally started to think that living wasn't just full of bad things.

At that point, was it too late?

At that point, was it no good?

Even if it was too late, was it no good?

For me, and for Hime-chan.

Are you saying that from the start, we had already failed?

She should have been happy now.

She said that she was happy.

Hime-chan said that every day was fun.

And yet.

Why couldn't she obtain even just that?

Is it something that outrageous?

Can an unfortunate person not be happy?

Just from being unfortunate you can't become happy?

It's not like she wanted to become more happy than other people.

Even half of that is fine.

Even ten percent of that is fine.

If only she wasn't unfortunate, it would have been fine.

It's not like she wanted something.

It's not like she wanted anything.

"Hime… chan"

Heavy.

Hime-chan's body was heavy.

Even though it should be light.

Hime-chan's body, which should have been as light as a feather, was far heavier than the Earth. Heavy, like a weight only able to destroy, like it was meant to torture me. Cutting and cutting and cutting until the last moment until the last moment until the last moment. Tormenting. Choking. Strangling. Closing.

Creating a blockage.

I was about to get killed.

It's scary.

Really scary.

I looked up at the sky.

Blue.

The weather is great

There's even a pleasant breeze blowing.

It goes well with a Japanese house.

A good place.

This is a good place.

Living in a place like this wouldn't be bad.

I guess Kuchiha-chan must have liked it too. She said something like that. That this place is a good environment. That's right. This is a very nice place for people to live in.

But… there's no one here.

Not anywhere.

There's only me here.

Nobody… nothing to do with me.

No sound, no light.

As if separated from the world, I was alone.

This place is dark.

It's dark.

Solitude in the dark.

Dark.

Darkness is dark.

Without any hope, with only despair.

I hate this. I don't like this place.

It's like torture.

It's the prison of destiny.

The guillotine of fate.

I don't want to be in this place.

I don't like being alone.

Please don't leave me alone.

I've had enough.

Please leave me alone.

I don't want to feel like this

These feelings, I didn't want them.

For what purpose was I born?

With what meaning was I born?

At the very least… not to feel like this.

If it was to feel like this, then I would rather have not been born. If it was for this pathetic feeling, for the feeling like it would be far better to just die, I would rather not have been born. I wish I had been killed last month. I wish I had been killed two months ago. And before that, and before that, and before that, and before that, any time, any way, rather than experience this dark, inescapable sense of loss, I should have been killed as soon as possible somewhere and sometime before this. I wish I had never been there from the beginning.

I came to think that everything was wrong.

I came to think that living itself was wrong.

I came to think that everything was a failure.

I came to think that not being dead itself was a failure.

"Sorry… Hime-chan. Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry……." I muttered and muttered and muttered and muttered and muttered like a madman. "I am… even in this situation, someone who cannot cry it seems……"

There was no response from Hime-chan.

Even without a response, I continued.

I continued my futile nonsense.

".....In that case, I shouldn't have saved her that time. At that time, still….."

"Dying wouldn't have been scary."

You were scared, right?

Because you seemed to be having fun. When you were talking with Miiko-san, when you were playing with Moeta-kun and Houkou-chan, when that idiot Nanananami kept you company, when you joked with Koutoumaru-san, and you made friends at school, right? Right, you introduced them to me.

You had someone you liked, right?

Truly, you seemed to be having fun.

I wish I hadn't known that.

With a feeling like mine right now.

She went to die?

"Uuuuuuhhhhhh"

It was no longer even words.

I couldn't help it anymore.

I'm begging you.

Someone please kill me now.

I don't want to go through any more pain.

I won't ask you to turn back time.

I won't request that kind of thing.

So please, don't advance time anymore.

Let’s just end it here.

I’m fine with a bad end, just end it.

Don’t continue.

Don’t continue, don’t continue, don’t continue!

Stop continuing with inertia!

"I think I’m gonna die…"

Surprisingly honestly, I thought that.

"I think I’m gonna die…"

At the very least, I will end.

Even if destiny and the inevitable and causality and fate don’t end.

Only I will end.

I’m not afraid to die now.

Because I’ve only known despair.

"……"

With a two story building, jumping won’t kill me. Is there a knife somewhere? There should at least be knives in the kitchen. And it’s a former clinic, so there should be a scalpel or two around here. It’s fine even if there’s not. I just need to hit my head against the wall and I’ll die. There are infinite ways to die. It’s fine, after all it was a worthless life.

Let’s just end it here.

The terminus.

The final stop.

The end.

"……"

Hime-chan and I were in a passing relationship. If it weren’t for Aikawa-san, let alone encountering her, I wouldn’t have known of her existence. She was a resident of another world. A resident of the same side as Shiogi-chan and Tamamo-chan. Even if she laughs friendly and thoughtlessly, even if she talks innocently and like she’s having fun, even then, she’s definitely different from me.

She’s different, so she’s unrelated.

Unrelated.

She is unrelated.

To begin with, I was bad at dealing with Hime-chan.

She's too familiar, she resembles Kunagisa.

And she resembles me.

I was bad at dealing with her.

What am I doing, dying for that?

I'm not that kind of guy.

I'm not such a good guy.

I'm a defective product.

My circuits that feel those kinds of things are broken.

I don't have any emotions.

I'm not feeling any emotions.

I don't feel anything.

I don't feel.

I'm not sad.

"Because Hime-chan died… what does that do?"

I released Hime-chan's body. She fell in the pool of blood with a splash, her small body. I stood up. I touched my face with my hands covered in blood. It had a slimy feeling. It feels disturbing. It feels disturbing. It feels disturbing. It feels disturbing. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting. It feels disgusting.

It feels good.

I licked my blood-stained fingers.

It had a bad taste.

That's obvious.

Blood that has touched the air is just iron.

Such a thing isn't a part of a human being.

"Let's wait for help while drinking tea or something….."

If I go to the kitchen, I should be able to boil some hot water. I'm sure even Kunagisa will have various formalities to go through, and coming here would take about an hour.

I'll wash away this blood in the shower room.

Then I'll borrow a book from the library.

I'll drink some tea and wait.

As I was about to start moving my feet towards the entrance.
"Ah, that’s right"
I turned around.
I had forgotten.
Good grief.
What am I doing forgetting important things like that?
I said.
"Hime-chan, you did good."

Bye bye.
Farewell.
Goodnight.

CHAPTER 8 —— PERSEVERANCE (FINAL STATION)

0

If you don’t obtain trust, you can’t betray.

1

This is what comes to mind when I hear the name Kunagisa Tomo.

Blue hair. Blue eyes. Friend. Innocent. Pure. Engineer. Same age. Only knows how to smile. Blue Savant. Kunagisa Syndicate. Kunagisa Nao. Kasumioka Douji. *Team*. Dead Blue. *Cheetah, Green Green Green, Double Flick, Reverse Cross*, *Cubic Loop*, *Dancing with Madness*, *Bad Kind*, *Trigger-Happy End*. Terrorist of the digital world. Blue fairy. Geocide. Can’t go down stairs alone. Can’t climb stairs alone. Recharging. Selfish. Miniature garden. Weak. Nocturnal. Single-mindedly concentrating on one thing. Unclear way of speaking. Boku-sama-chan. Feels good and fluffy when touched. Hates baths. Prussian blue. Doesn’t grow. Absolute stoppage. Absolute stagnation. Tyrant. An existence like family. A concept like a little sister. Outstanding memory. Once she learns something, she never forgets it. Rich. Currently disowned. Apartment in Shirosaki. Mainframe. Her roots spread all over the world. Device. Inhuman. Atypical. An important existence for me. An irreplaceable existence for me. The existence I loved. Back when I wasn’t fully broken, the existence I loved. The existence who thoroughly destroyed me. The existence I thoroughly destroyed.

"....."

Since then.

I don’t know what happened since then.

But it was probably handled appropriately.

It’s not a case on a secluded island, so it’s probably impossible to completely erase it, but… at the very least, it wasn’t an incident of a scale so large that it’s impossible to cover it up. At most, only four humans died. It’s nothing when compared to a missile falling in a war.

Four people is only half of eight, and a tenth of forty. That's all there was to it, after all.

Ah…….

Now that I think about it, it's a story without emotion.

Before I rushed over to Hime-chan, I asked for Kunagisa's help. Self-preservation was the first thing I thought of. Unconsciously, I ran towards self-preservation.

Really, I'm the worst.

I'm truly the worst.

"Ii-cha-n?"

After there was a knock and then the door opened.

Suddenly, blue hair from the other side.

It was Kunagisa.

"Ii-chan, did you wake up?"

"Mm…….? Woke up you say…."

Huh. I was sleeping.

So deeply that I couldn't dream.

Like I was dead. Like usual.

"……What time is it?"

"Ten at night. The hour boku-sama-chan begins operating."

"Ah… right, and what day is today?"

"Uni?"

"What day is today?"

"What, are you playing stupid? It's the 17th of August."

"……Um……."

Ah.

So that was still only yesterday's story.

Is that it?

I thought a hundred years had passed already.

"Ii-cha-n. Get up get up get up get up get up get up get up get up-" Approaching me, clap clap clap clap clap clap clap, she hit a sixteen beat rhythm on my cheeks. "When boku-sama-chan is awake and Ii-chan is sleeping, it's boring!"

"…..That's my bad"

"I'm hungry. Make something."

"Okay."

I stood up.

Huh, I was sleeping while sitting?

That's quite skillful, if I say so myself.

"…..Huh?" As I was leaving the room, I tilted my head. "Tomo… where are we?"

"In boku-sama-chan's home. Why are you asking that?"

"Why am I here?"

"……Kunagisa punch!"

I was hit with an uppercut.

From what I saw, she was pouting slightly.

"Come on, Ii-chan. Even though boku-sama-chan is generously taking care of you, if you say those kinds of things, you'll get punished!"

"Mm… Wait, wait. I remembered."

That's right.

I was picked up directly from the lab and put into an unknown car by a person I don't know and brought to Kunagisa's apartment without going back to my apartment, without contacting anyone.

After that, I mumbled a lot.

And after that, I slept.

As if I was dead, I slept.

"Ii-chan, have you not been sleeping much lately? You were sleeping a looot! Soundly sleeping. Or is it more like sleeping like a log?"

"Hmm."

"Boku-sama-chan played all sorts of pranks on Ii-chan."

"What?"

"Ufufufu," Kunagisa laughed wryly. "Ii-chan is quite bold when he's sleeping."

"Wha…"

"Fu." It was a nasty, provocative laugh. "Well, you can say what you want with your mouth, but your body is honest."

"You bastard! What did you do to my body!? Hey!"

"Kyahaha, wai--!"

While laughing like she was having fun, she escaped in the blink of an eye, as expected within her own residence. If she disappears in this huge apartment, there's no way I can catch her. What a guy… attacking someone in their sleep. Even I couldn't do such a fiendish act… But that's why I was short on sleep.

I mean it was a joke, right?

It was a joke, right, Kunagisa-san?

Really, I'm sorry for making you worry.

"....."

I gave up and headed to the kitchen, avoiding all the cables spread out under my feet like traps. It wasn't just on the floor, a countless amount of cables were fixed to the walls and ceiling. It was even worse than the last time I came here… It's as if a machine with a mind of its own was invading the space.

I opened the refrigerator in the kitchen.

…….It's a mystery how all the stuff I made last month was still here. I mean, most of the contents of the fridge were almost all gone. Did she spend the last half a month just eating junk food? What a monster. There was nothing I could do, so I gave up and changed focus to the freezer. There should still be a little hope there. Frozen food is quite dull, but… I'm not in a condition where I can make any sort of elaborate dishes. The condiments should still be here, ah, as expected, they were as I left them. I half-mindedly made some side dishes that might fill the stomach while cooking rice. The rice cooker. When Kunagisa eats she eats a lot. When she doesn't eat she doesn't eat at all. She's that type. Which reminds me, the chef on that island… um, what was her name again? The dishes she served at a relatively regular basis were delicious to eat every day. If you get to that level, it changes everything up to your everyday habits.

After spending about an hour cooking, I called out, "Hey, Tomo, I made some food, so get over here!" but got no response. Either she didn't hear me, or she did hear me but pretended like she didn't. There were no trays or anything that convenient here. I had no choice, so I carried each plate one at a time into the dining room (from what I could see, this room seemed to not be used at all, and so there was

quite a lot of dust piled up. Not to use Kuchiha-chan's words, but when people don't use something dust piles up. It's the same for humans). After carrying in one plate, I thought of cleaning up first, so I decided to go look for a rag. In the end, it wasn't until thirty minutes later that I was ready to call over Kunagisa. It didn't really matter what dish I made since it went cold anyway.

"Thanks for the food!"

"Eat up."

Greedly, Kunagisa extended her hands which were both equipped with chopsticks to the plate. When she's like this, voices can't reach her. In regards to the type of people that don't talk while eating, when it's like the fox-masked man it's cool, but in this case, she's just someone who's obsessed with food. If you don't eat while you can, you don't know when you might die from starvation. If she was like this even on the day of her medical checkup, Nao-san must have been quite worried about her… that guy is pretty obsessed with his little sister.

Little sister.

Rizumu-chan.

That's bad, I remembered.

"Thanks for the meal!"

"You're welcome."

After we both finished eating, I was about to gather up the plates and wash them quickly when, "Ah! Ii-chan. Ii-chan, Ii-chan, Ii-chan." Kunagisa called me.

"....You only have to say Ii-chan once."

"Okay, okay."

"You only have to say okay once too."

"I have something to report."

"Huh?"

Kunagisa had an expression like it wasn't much, a soft expression going funyaa like always, but since her sense of value is completely different from that of a normal person, you shouldn't trust in the emotions that you can read on her face.

"It's about the situation Ii-chan got involved with yesterday."

"Oh."

"It can't be covered up."

"Huh?" I put down the plates that I gathered, sat down, and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"How should I put it? It's a bit out of the jurisdiction of the Kunagisa Syndicate, and there's a slight problem. No, since boku-sama-chan is now an outsider, it's only hearsay, but..." Kunagisa said while staring at the empty plates. It was as if a part of her was thinking, should I lick the plates? What should I do? Will I get scolded? "Assistant Professor Kigamine Yaku is fine. The caretaker Madoka Kuchiha is also fine. We can do something about those two. We can manage to do something about those two. After that, they'll become plains and mountains. I mean, no matter what, the future will take care of itself."

Assistant Professor Kigamine.

Kuchiha-chan.

"But the other two."

"The other two….."

"One of them, Yukariki Ichihime, is a resident of the same apartment where Ii-chan lives. And… Niounomiya Rizumu. Well, in her case, you could also call her Niounomiya Izumu, so technically speaking, it's three people.

Hime-chan.

Rizumu-chan.

Izumu-kun.

"Those three are outside the range of the Kunagisa Syndicate."

"There's… things that are outside the Kunagisa Syndicate's range? In that unarguably absolute organization?

"Rather than out of range, it's more like it's in someone else's yard, someone else's territory. How should I put it? It would be easier to understand if I drew it on a chart, but… well, I guess it's fine. This'll be a really lazy and simplified explanation, but please listen carefully."

".....My will to listen completely vanished with that lead in……"

"This world is split in four different stable worlds, and all of these worlds overlap with each other a little."

"Are you a cult leader or something……" I was a bit lost. "Please explain it with a more normal way of speaking."

"Ro-ger. Then, um, the four worlds, first there's the Normal World. The **here** and **now**, I guess. A world of war and peace, well-suited for everyday life. That is the base. The standard. If you want to think about how much you can use it as a standard, let's see, that place where Ii-chan studied abroad, the ER3 System, that is at the very limit of the *Normal World*.

"……You're saying **that** is *normal*?"

"Well, just barely. That's the bottom," Kunagisa explained as if carelessly reciting the multiplication table. "And as for the remaining three, if you say that the everyday world is the one on the front, then they're the back I guess. First, there's the world centered around the Kunagisa Syndicate. That is the World of Political Power. Ichigai, Nishiori, Sanzaka, Shikabane, Gotoride, Rokukase, the seventh name is skipped over, and lastly, Hachikiri. The Kunagisa Syndicate is what governs them. Since it's sort of like a society, it's not that well known, but its power is quite wide. Then, you remember, right? ….Iria-chan. Iria-chan of Wet Crow's Feathers Island. The world centered on the Four Gods and One Mirror, including the Akagami family to which Iria belonged. That is the World of Financial Power. Akagami, Iigami, Ujigami, Ekagami, Origami. The financial conglomerates. If you want to compare it to something similar to that in the Surface World, then I guess the upper echelon of society would be there. You know that Rule is said to be the Japanese ER3 System, right? In reality, there's a paper-thin difference between them… they're both of equally bad character."

"Hmm… well, you may be right"

"Finally, the last world---the last both numerically and conceptually. ….There was that serial killer in May, right? The one you told me about before. That Zerozaki something person. With those kinds of evil spirits at its core, it's the World of Combat Abilities. In short, the inhabitants of that world are monsters. It gives the feeling of being a place where no human being should live. It's in a state where there are a variety of heterogeneous forces. Unlike the Kunagisa

Syndicate and the Four Gods and One Mirror, the inhabitants of that world don't act with any objective in particular, but the abilities they possess are overwhelmingly dangerous. The rule there is that there are no rules. Being a match for one thousand is an expression that was created just for the sake of adapting to this… just the power of that expression is enough to make the other three worlds freeze, they're the personification of the grotesque. These three worlds have fused together in various ways, but while there is fusion, there is also opposition."

"Like a power balance. It's vague, but I remember having heard something about a three way deadlock… from when I was a child. Well, it's true, though, that I wasn't really aware of this six years ago……"

"Hmm. Then it'll be a quick explanation," Kunagisa said. It seems that she decided to not lick the plates, and she looked at me normally. "Ii-chan probably knows, but that Yukariki girl seems to have a link with the Origami, a branch of the Four Gods and One Mirror. She was one of the soldiers of their private army… but boku-sama-chan doesn't think that Ii-chan doesn't know about that. And then, the Niounomiya are-"

"I know that too. They're killers."

"Yes. The Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya's Troupe. During the period when boku-sama-chan was a terrorist, I was very careful to not get involved with them. That was also the case even in the affair with Zerozaki-kun. They're too similar… so it's scary."

"Scary, huh?"

"Yes. And therefore, it's outside of our jurisdiction."

"*Therefore*, you say……"

"No, that's right. *Therefore* and that's the end of it. That's all. Not half-heartedly, but completely it doesn't concern me. That's where the logic establishes itself. Well, having said that, it doesn't seem to be as big of a deal as I was worried about. This won't break the power balance or anything like that. The balance is so completely and abnormally firm that it doesn't seem like the life of at most one or two people will do anything to it. However… that's precisely **why** it's

difficult to cover it up."

"I don't really get it… what does that mean?"

"You see, I said that even in that three way deadlock, things are *merging together*, right? That's why every piece of information, whatever it is, will be passed over to **that side** by someone. Because of my family's circumstances, it's not something that can be completely closed off."

"Ah, that's what that meant…."

You can't seal a person's mouth.

It might not be such a simple problem, but ultimately, that's what it is.

"But I don't think that means you can't cover it up… In short, you just need to not leak it to the *front*, the Surface World. Isn't that right?"

"When boku-sama-chan says we can't hide it..." Kunagisa lifted the ends of both of her eyes with her index fingers. I didn't think it resembled that person at all, but I knew who it was. "That means that I can't hide it from Jun-chan."

"....."

Aikawa… Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor.

"It was that Yukariki girl, right? She was involved with Jun-chan and had a relationship with Jun-chan, right? That's a bit bad for Ii-chan." Kunagisa continued without stopping. "Because it seems like that Yukariki-chan died because of Ii-chan."

For a moment.

Excuses tried to pass through my mouth.

That's not it. That's wrong.

But I couldn't say it.

Because… it was true.

It was true.

"Well, it's Jun-chan so I doubt she's going to blame you, but it'll be awkward. If I could hide it then I would have done so, but if **that side** were to step in, it would be impossible. If it's not exposed from the inside, then Jun-chan will definitely find out from somewhere else.

That's because Jun- chan is familiar with all of the three worlds I just mentioned. And also, I introduced Chii-kun to her the other day. So if she wants to know something, then there's nothing in the galaxy she can't find out. Really, that was a failure. Boku-sama-chan had promised not to introduce anyone in the first place. That's why boku-sama-chan will try to help as much as possible, but even then, I can only hide *that* from Jun-chan for three days at most.."

"I didn't really intend to hide it from Aikawa-san"

"Hmm?"

"I only asked for your help because if there were five people and four died, then I would certainly be the culprit. If that happened, it would be inconvenient in a variety of ways. As long as you don't have me there, you don't have to cover up the incident itself."

"Hmm."

"That's why it's fine if Aikawa-san finds out. Rather, that's what I want. I don't know the reason why that incident happened, but... if I don't know, then I'm fine with not knowing. Aikawa-san will solve this case beautifully like always."

"**The reason why that happened**, huh." Kunagisa repeated with some hidden meaning. "I'll ask just in case. Ii-chan, in this case, is Ii-chan not the culprit?"

".....What makes you think that?"

"The same reason you said earlier. If there were five people and four died, the last person is usually the culprit."

"Are you doubting me?"

"I trust you. It's verification. If I don't completely understand the situation, then I can't cover it up. If you killed them, then won't you please just say that you killed them? If it's corrected later, then it'll be pretty troublesome. Even the power of the Kunagisa Syndicate is not limitless."

".....I didn't kill them"

"Really?"

"Really. That's not a lie"

That's right, I didn't kill them.

I didn't kill anyone.

At the very least, it's just those four people.

As a matter of fact, I have multiple personalities and at night, when I was supposed to be asleep, I killed those other four people. As long as the punchline in the end doesn't turn out to be something like that out of a stereotypical mystery novel, then I didn't kill anyone.

"Hmm." Kunagisa nodded. "Then, this time. I didn't ask you yesterday since you seemed to be really tired, but can you tell me the full story? This time, what exactly did you do in that place that boku-sama-chan doesn't know about?"

"Um… how should I say it?"

From where should I begin?

After some hesitation, I decided to start with the day I first met Assistant Professor Kigamine, the first of August. Of course, I didn't remember every detail, so I cut out some parts like about Miiko-san, the conversation with the fox-masked man, and the things that weren't related to the story. Also, while there was absolutely no reason to, I said that Kasugai-san was living at Hime-chan's place.

It took me thirty minutes to finish the story.

It made me feel like it was just that.

All that happened in just thirty minutes.

It's ephemeral.

"Hmm..."

"Tomo, do you have any ideas?"

"Hmm… well, I guess I have a hypothesis."

"What's the hypothesis?"

"In this case, it's usually a domino murder."

"What's that?"

"A was killed by B, B was killed by C, and C was killed by a trap that A had set up before they died. So everyone dies, that's the pattern. It's a type of mystery novel."

"Hmm… there's people out there thinking about some weird stuff. But you know..."

Setting aside Assistant Professor Kigamine who was an ordinary person.

Madoka Kuchiha's deathless body.

Niounomiya Rizumu, Rizumu the *Carnival*.

Niounomiya Izumu, Izumu the *Man Eater*.

And… Zigzag's disciple, Yukariki Ichihime.

"To be honest, I can't even imagine a single human being winning in a one on one against Hime-chan, and it doesn't even matter if you keep increasing the number of people. The *string techniques* she uses, it's basically something developed to fight against multiple people. It's the ultimate defensive technique. It's like being wrapped in a spider's web."

"Hmm... *Carnival* is still the *Man Eater*, in either case it's still Niounomiya-kun. However, if you strike when it's *Carnival* on the surface, then you should be fine. Although, if that was the case, then she wouldn't have been able to survive for that long… Maybe since they said that it was a split personality, they're able to control when one of them comes out and the other goes away to some extent."

"Pain or a feeling of danger is the signal. He said something like that. In regards to Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, we could just sum it up by saying that they were Izumu-kun's *targets*, but… there's also the fact that Izumu-kun was killed and that Hime-chan, who was unrelated, was also killed… It's complicated. Or rather, it's impossible."

"What about the possibility of them killing each other?"

"Huh?"

"They killed each other. The strong ones crushed each other."

Killed each other.

Hime-chan and… Izumu-kun?

"But then the corpses would be in the same place, wouldn't they. One was in the courtyard, and the other in a room on the second floor. They're in completely different places."

"Right. I was just asking." Kunagisa went hmm while nodding, as if she were digesting the information, and continued. "Suicide. The person who survived the battle royale then committed sucide."

"That's impossible. No matter who you take, it's impossible to commit such a suicide."

She who had her upper body and lower body ripped in two.

She who had her neck snapped and her right shoulder ripped off.

She who had her neck cut through and a hole opened in her chest.

She who had lost both of her arms and had her neck twisted.

That kind of suicide doesn't exist.

That kind of accident doesn't exist.

Only...

The image of being killed and thrown away.

The image of being eaten and scattered.

"Then it would be the crime of someone outside of the group, but..."

"Yeah… it may be natural to think so through the process of elimination, but that would require an outsider appearing. There was no room for an outsider to appear. In that sense, it's like a stormy mountain retreat similar to Wet Crow's Feather Island, or like a lonely island similar to Shadou Kyouichirou's Research Facility."

"Huh. What about Kasugai-chan who went home first?" Kunagisa said. "Couldn't you say that Kasugai-chan was not not not not not not an outsider?"

"....I can't tell whether that was a positive or a negative question, but that's also not possible. Because that person is Kasugai-san, you know?"

"I see."

Kunagisa Tomo was convinced.

It seems it was a convincing answer.

It's Kasugai-san, you know?

It's a reason more eloquent than any elaborate logic.

"And also, even if there was an outsider…. or even if there was a secret basement in that lab and someone besides Kuchiha-chan had been living there in hiding, the problem is the same. They can't win against Hime-chan or Izumu-kun. It's impossible to kill those two. That's certain..."

As long as it wasn't Aikawa Jun.

As long as the strongest card wasn't used.

"....Yeah. In that case, the reason why Ii-chan was the only insider who was able to sleep until morning would become a mystery…

Hmm. Having listened to that story, there's only one reasonable hypothesis that remains in the end."

"A hypothesis?"

"Want to hear it?"

"Ah, no…." I slurred my words. "It's fine. It doesn't concern me."

"Hmm… well, at the point where a *Killing Name* is involved, it's also something quite far from boku-sama-chan's tastes….." Kunagisa said.

"But if there's a culprit in this case, then he is pretty pragmatic. You know, in mystery novels, I don't know why, but they often kill people one at a time. One by one, one by one, in order. But if you think about it normally, it would be more efficient to do all of that at once. A one hit kill, one hit withdrawal. That's a basic on the battlefield.

"Pragmatic, huh…."

In other words… not skewed. Evenly distributed. To put it plainly, that's what it is, but is it really, in the truest sense, definitely *that*? That situation, that scene, seemed to be very far from those words.

That was skewed.

Very skewed.

While thinking about the meaning of the word *pragmatic*, I looked in Kunagisa's direction, and Kunagisa also stared at me. Then, after looking a bit hollow, as if she was thinking about something,

"Hey, Ii-chan."

She said.

"Perhaps, Ii-chan, are you feeling down? For a while there, you didn't seem to be very lively."

"Feeling down……" I hesitated to answer that sudden question. "...Ah, I am."

"Why?"

"That's… people I knew died. And it was four people at once. Anyone would feel down."

"That's weird." Kunagisa tilted her head curiously. "Don't say that. Up to now, how many people do you think have died around us? After all that, adding four more is nothing. Don't mind it. It's okay, it's

okay." Nihaha, Kunagisa laughed lightly, without any ill will. "In the first place, it's a weird story. The ones who died were those four, it was neither Ii-chan nor boku-sama-chan who died, right? Then it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't… matter"

That's right.

That may be right.

Kunagisa is alive.

Kunagisa Tomo is alive.

Here, talking with me like this.

Then it's fine.

The world hasn't changed at all.

It keeps flowing as it is.

Destiny… is making it flow.

"Why don't you come here?"

"…….Eh?"

"Why don't you come live here? That's what I said. After all, there are so many empty rooms here. Come live together with boku-sama-chan."

"……."

"After all, it'll be hard for Ii-chan to come back to your apartment, won't it? Even if you can hide the incident, even if you can hide the truth, the reality is that you can't hide that Yukariki-chan won't come back anymore. If that happens, it'll become awkward with everyone in the apartment, right?"

That's right……

It's not just about Aikawa-san. Nanananami, Houko-chan, Moeta-kun, Koutoumaru… and Miiko-san. Everyone, everyone, everyone, liked Hime-chan.

And I ruined that.

….With kind of face should I go back home with?

"I'll get the Fiat's tires repaired and deliver it to the parking lot. Inevitably, that will also mean you'll have to cut ties with Neon-chan

from last time, but it can't be helped, right? Or does Ii-chan have some attachment?"

"Attachment….."

"It's okay to say it, you know? Boku-sama-chan doesn't really mind that kind of stuff. Whether it's whining or complaining, I will receive it all with my big love." Kunagisa leaned forward, as if crawling on the table, moving her face toward me. "Or maybe is it that Ii-chan is more interested in living together with Kasugai-chan?"

"……So you knew?"

"If it's about Ii-chan, then usually"

Kunagisa smiled broadly.

Her big eyes became slightly narrower.

"That's why it doesn't really bother boku-sama-chan. No matter who you like, who you love, who attracts you, who you embrace, who you kiss, who you have sex with. I don't care at all about all of that, rather, I'd even support you. If Ii-chan is having fun, then it's all fine. There's no need for distortion, it's fine if Ii-chan just keeps being Ii-chan. If you became an honest person, then I would be very happy for you. After all, I'm interested in what kind of person Ii-chan will become. Ii-chan's happiness is my happiness. That's why Ii-chan is free to do and to think whatever he wants… but, just one thing."

Kunagisa's eyes….

Changed from blue to blue.

Clearer.

Purer.

"If Ii-chan stops being *mine*, I will destroy the Earth. If Ii-chan disappears from my side again like in the past, at that time, there won't be a next time. If I don't have Ii-chan , then I don't want anyone else. I will destroy everything without leaving a trace. I will erase everything until not even cinders remain."

".....To… mo."

"Well, ehehe, you already know that so much that I don't even have to say it, right? Ii-chan is a clever guy…."

She laughed cheerfully.

Sincerely, innocently, like an innocent youth….

And so it was an arrogant, bewitching laugh.

I had no other choice but to nod.

Inside whose palms did I, did my body exist… I was made painfully aware of that again.

"Yeah, I know. It's obvious, right?"

"That's right. It's fine, Ii-chan is fine. Ufufu, even without doing anything, Ii-chan is the messiah, the hero. Ii-chan is an admirable person who is currently saving the world. That's pretty amazing, isn't it? Thanks to Ii-chan, today is peaceful again, right?"

"……..Right"

"Ehehe. Iichan. Iichan. Iichan." Seeing me nod, Kunagisa suddenly wrapped her arms around my back and hugged me. Kunagisa's weight pressed down on me heavily. "Ii-chan, I love you!"

"Ah… yeah"

It's… fine already.

Thinking is bothersome.

Living is bothersome.

Then.

Being drowned is fine.

If you're crazy then go crazy. If you're broken, then break down. Someone who's ill shouldn't just walk down the road. Resigning myself and sinking silently is what's called being resolute. Rather than just following destiny or rebelling against it, just be swept away… That is the way of life for a defeated person.

"Hey, Tomo."

I said.

"Do lewd things to me."

"…….Hmm?"

Kunagisa moved her chin and placed it on my shoulder, and then rubbed her head against my face. What kind of face she was making, I couldn't even imagine.

"Is it fine?"

"…….It's fine"

By now, anything.

By now, I didn't care about anything anymore.

The world is not filled with despair, the world is despair itself. The world is hell, what about it? Don't want and you won't get robbed. If there is a door, then turn back. Don't cry, don't laugh, that has no meaning. Both believers and nonbelievers will equally not be saved.

Then.

Stagnate.

Settle down.

Drown.

Make me yours.

"Then let's do it… Wait, today is no good."

"…..Why?"

"I have another health checkup tomorrow. If we do anything lewd today, Nao-kun will know"

"…..That was it. A health checkup. Did they find something?"

"Yes." Kunagisa briefly separated from me. Briefly. Briefly. Briefly. "You know. Here and there, it seems to be in a pinch? Well there's nothing we can do about it. For boku-sama-chan, from the start, it's like I'm forcing something to live even though it is wrong."

"And… how long do you have?"

"Oh, it's not something that urgent. I'll be fine for two or three years, I think. It depends on tomorrow's results."

"I see… then we're postponing it"

"That's right. Ah, but what if it's only halfway…"

"No." I stood up from my chair. "Let's save the fun for later. I'll go get my stuff."

"Uni?"

"We'll be living together, right? Here, together."

"……Ah, is it fine?"

"What do you mean? It was you who invited me."

"No, I just thought you'd have some more lingering attachment. I knew that you'd eventually come to that decision but it was quicker than I thought. Big surprise."

"I'll also quit university and… I'll live here leisurely with you for

the rest of my life… Quick? That's not it. With what happened this time, I was made well aware."

How much I was yearning for something that I didn't deserve.

How much I was broken as a human.

In reality, I should have fully realized it back in May.

Let's stop now.

Don't involve unrelated people.

Don't involve the world.

Let's close it now.

Let's close myself.

"Ufufu. If so, then let's spend all day flirting. Let's lead a life of obscenity. Boku-sama-chan and you, are we Adam and Eve?"

"That would be the kind of miniature garden that you like. Superimposed, superimposed."

"But if it's just luggage, then you can just send someone to get it, you know? If Ii-chan himself went to the apartment, it'd be troublesome if you met someone, right? Then wouldn't it be best if you were to quietly disappear?"

"It's fine. It's already night time, so everyone should be asleep," I said. "And I also have some things that I don't want people to touch."

"Ii-chan."

"Yeah?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm relieved." Kunagisa confessed to me along with a smile. "If you spend time with a person like Jun-chan, anyone would change. Ii-chan is not an exception. I thought things like, 'is he going to change?' Because Jun-chan is a big exception. Her charisma isn't half-baked, it's special. Yeah, she's definitely special. From the start, Ii-chan has been a passive person, so you're influenced by other people quite easily. Going back five years to America, it seems like a lot of things happened there and I wondered if you would change. In fact, you did change a lot. But."

But.

However.

Kunagisa said.

"Ii-chan will never change."

Kunagisa said.
"Ii-chan will really never change."
Kunagisa said.
"Ii-chan will never change. Forever."
Kunagisa said.
Kunagisa said.

Kunagisa said.

2

Kunagisa Tomo, who rarely goes outside, didn't have any machine with mobile abilities. In other words, she didn't possess any car or motorcycle. So I returned to my run-down apartment by walking. Kunagia offered to call a taxi, but I turned her down. I don't intend on saying something pretentious like I was in the mood for a walk. I simply wanted some time to prepare myself.

Prepare.

I lied to Kunagisa about having important stuff I didn't want people to touch. Nothing is important to me. Neither to this world nor to me. For this world and for me.

There's not a single important thing.

Then it's attachment.

What Kunagisa was talking about, attachment.

I wanted to go back at least once to the apartment.

Go back and see everyone one last time.

"…..Saying that would also be false."

Ah, that's also false.

I don't want to see anyone.

I have no intention of seeing them.

If I saw them, what would we talk about?

"But… that's still lingering attachment, isn't it….."

Do I want to be consoled?

Do I want to be insulted?

Do I think I'm performing in some TV drama?

It's ridiculous.

It's beyond ridiculous

"It's nonsense within nonsense…"

It was about 3:30 in the middle of the night when I arrived at Senbon Nakadachiuri. I wasn't wearing a watch, and my phone was still turned off, so it was just a guess.

In front of the entrance to the apartment.

Suddenly, I met Kasugai-san.

An ambush.

Really, like a god of death.

What's this person doing here in the middle of the night?

"....Oh. Oh my."

"....."

"Welcome home."

".....Kasugai-san. It looks like you're fine."

"You're quite late. And adding to that, you don't seem to be *fine*.

".....Yeah."

"Where's the Fiat?"

"I left it there."

"Wher's Hime-chan?"

"She's dead."

"Is that so. Hmm." Kasugai-san nodded without any emotion as if it was nothing. For this person, the death of a human being, whether it be someone else or herself, she had only that much recognition for it. She reached that position, that stage, long ago. "Then I'll move to the room downstairs. After all, a four tatami room is too cramped for two people to live in. That thing about taking half a tatami when you're awake and one tatami when you're asleep was a lie, you know."

"....."

"What's with that face you're making? That face. No, no. You should stop that." Kasugai-san crossed her arms, as if to confront me. "Don't try to make other people sad just because you don't feel sad. I don't have that kind of emotion. Demanding something you can't do out of someone is unfair, and asking someone to do something they can't do is also unfair."

".....I guess so."

"Not being able to mourn someone's death isn't particularly a bad thing, don't try to blame it on me. And also I should have warned you about this. I don't want to hear any complaints."

"I understand....." I said, holding back most of what I wanted to say. In reality, I didn't want to understand what Kasugai-san was saying, even though I'm sure I couldn't comprehend it anyway, but

arguing with this person is essentially meaningless. "But please let me just confirm one thing… that bad feeling you had was mainly about Kuchiha-chan, right?"

"Correct."

Correct.

As expected of a biologist.

And this is a biologist who generally specializes in *animals*.

".....You don't have to bother moving to Hime-chan's room. I'm leaving."

"Yeah? You'll do that?"

As expected, Kasugai-san was surprised.

"Yeah. That's why I came to collect my things... I'm going to Kunagisa's place. I can't face everyone else right now, and besides, it's something that I've been thinking about for a while."

"Hmm."

Kasugai-san didn't say anything

That's the kind of person she is.

She has no opinion.

"It was a short relationship."

"Enough to be too long."

"I'm feeling a bit lonely."

"Really?"

"Who knows… I wonder how it is really. Well, I'm going to the convenience store now. Be sure to leave before I get back. Bye bye."

Kasugai-san said this without changing her expression and passed by me. Really, with words as casual as if we'd see each other again tomorrow as a matter of course, she passed me by.

I didn't return any words.

Not even goodbye or farewell. Not even sorry or good day. I felt that these words were not suited towards that person.

But should I have said something?

Like, let's meet again if we have a connection.

"........Why?"

Why did this happen?

It shouldn't have been like this.

But of course, that was something needless to think about, as I had thought about it over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, as if just the number of times that I thought about it would give me the answer. That it's my fault.

The cause in the cause and effect was me.

It's better to not have any ties.

Isn't that what that means?

I looked up at the apartment. It kinda feels… even though it's only been two days since I haven't been back… it already felt like I didn't know this place at all.

A wanderer.

What a bad word.

Really, what a bad word.

While hesitating, I took a step inside. Naturally, there wasn't anything particularly special. It didn't feel any different from when I was walking on the asphalt earlier. It didn't change.

I haven't changed.

I don't need Kunagisa to tell me that.

It's fine.

Let's give up already. Let's stop already.

It's pathetic for a weak person to just move their feet, isn't it?

It's unsightly to see a loser struggle, isn't it?

Know yourself.

An inexperienced person shouldn't make merry.

Don't move forward while lacking the ability.

Pull back.

A corpse shouldn't pretend to be a living person.

There will be something to lose.

Let's admit it.

I lost a long time ago.

Admit it, not with just empty words.

Honestly.

"I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good I'm no good."

Truly no good.

Climbing the stairs, I went into my room.

Let's see… A change of clothes, my passport, and… my insurance card. My books… I guess it's fine to leave them. I still have enough books to read piled up at Kunagisa's place. Then everything that I'm taking should fit in a gym bag.

I unlocked the door and entered.

It's dark.

I turned on the lights.

"....."

"....."

Miiko-san was there.

Her black jinbei seemed to have melted into the darkness.

She noticed me entering the room.

".....Welcome home… I guess?"

"....."

"You're not gonna say 'I'm home?'"

".....Please don't act like you can see through me." I ignored her and walked towards the closet. Alright, I think I left the passport around here somewhere… "And also, please don't enter into other people's rooms without their permission."

"I was worried about you."

"Worried? ….That's unnecessary."

"Hmm… where's Hime?"

Shut up.

You're irritating.

Why should I have to explain everything?

It has nothing to do with me.

Hime-chan too.

You too.

So stop running your mouth even though it doesn't concern you.

"She's dead."

"Hmm."

Miiko-san nodded normally.

She took out an iron fan from her pocket and opened it with a

bam.

"And?"

"What is it?"

"Why are you here when Hime is dead?"

".....Because even if Hime-chan dies, I don't die. Because it doesn't concern me---"

With almost no sound, with almost no opening.

The iron fan hit my cheek.

A shock as if I had been struck by lightning ran through my cheeks and I was sent flying away from the closet. I hit the wall with my shoulder, and with quite the momentum, I hit my head. It hurt. The pain in my cheeks continued to hurt. The wound Izumu-kun inflicted on me must have opened. Even though it was finally about to heal…..

It hurts.

What was that for?

"I can at least tell by the look on your face that something happened, but I don't know what it was," Miiko-san said flatly. "I'm not even really interested, but answer the question. Why are you here, and where are you planning to go?"

".....I'm running away. Because I'm scared."

Am I running away?

Am I scared?

That's right.

I'm scared, so I'll run away.

That's obvious.

I'm only doing what's obvious.

It's not my fault. Don't get angry at me. Don't blame me.

"Hmmm."

"I also don't want to cause any trouble… **Extraordinary losers should stay with the losers, the grotesque should stay with the grotesque**."

"Hmm… Grotesque, huh?" Miiko-san crouched down to my eye level as I still sat there. "Inoji. To me, crying when you're sad, getting angry when something bad happens, laughing when something fun happens, being happy when you fall in love, fighting those that you

hate, feeling lonely when you're alone, and getting along with others isn't what makes someone human."

"....."

"You call yourself a defective product, but I don't think--"

"Shut up!"

I...

Without understanding why, I screamed.

"Don't talk like you know me! Don't look down on me! Why are you pitying me, am I that pathetic?! You don't even know anything about me! It shouldn't have been like that, it's weird! It shouldn't have been like that, it doesn't make sense even to me! I don't know why it became like this! But it happened and there's nothing I can do! I don't even care anymore! It's not like it's the first time! Until now, how many people, how many people, how many people, how many dozens, how many hundreds, how many thousands have died because of me?! After all that, even if one or two or three or four people die, I don't feel anything!"

I grabbed Miiko-san's collar violently.

Ah.

I want to tear her apart like this.

I want to tear her up into pieces and destroy her.

Anger had taken over me.

Was I mad at Miiko-san telling me that?

Yeah. That's right.

It's not because Hime-chan died.

It's not because Hime-chan died.

"In the first place, I thought that Hime-chan was annoying because she was always clinging to me! I smiled at her by chance, but somehow she got the idea that we were friends! I always thought she was an impertinent and selfish brat! I feel relieved now that she's gone! I don't care about her anymore!"

"....."

"Miiko-san, you too! You too, always, always, talking like you

know it all! If you truly understand my feelings, then don't say something so insensitive! Don't pretend like you trust me! Every time I hear those enlightened words of yours, I get annoyed! What's with the older sister act, do you think I'll be grateful!? You act so nice, but what exactly have you done for me! Don't say there's hope for someone who's in despair! Are you going to take responsibility for giving me hope?! That kind of thing is disgusting! It's disgusting, like walking on cardboard with socks on! A failure will always be a failure, and so, as long as they don't have any hope, they won't fall further into despair! Why won't you let me give up, isn't it fine already!?"

I spat it out.

I spat out everything that I had been holding back.

"It's people like you that I hate the most!"

I had the urge to laugh.

After all, it was just that.

A bond between two people.

Connections.

Consideration. Kindness. Compassion.

Wanting to help. Wanting to protect.

Trusting. Counting on others.

What a joke.

Clinging to others like that is foolish.

It ruins the mood.

It spoils everything.

People can only live alone. There's no such thing as a relationship without betrayal. Where is there a human relationship where there's no betrayal? There's no such thing. Everyone betrays someone, everyone gets betrayed by someone, and they still all just trust each other until the end. That's all. They all betray someone in the end.

Betray.

Then I just need to betray them.

Trusting someone.

Trusting myself.

I wanted to do that, I really did.

But I couldn't.

It's impossible.

Don't say such unreasonable things.

Can't you see that I did my best?

Can't you see that I managed to get here by doing my best?

At this point, please just let give up.

Rather, you should praise me.

I won't be able to do it again.

Never again for all eternity.

So just praise me.

Isn't this enough already?

This is who I am.

Hate me, despise me, ridicule me.

I don't care what you say, I'll take any abuse you dish out. I'm a pathetic guy who deserves all kinds of slander. I don't care about anyone. I've destroyed everything that I cared about. Nobody who's been by my side has ever been happy.

Nobody can exist by my side.

"It's fine already, just leave me alone, it's only irritating when you worry about me! Even you must be fed up with pain in the ass like me, right!? It'd feel nice to cut ties with an idiot like me, right!? You actually hate me and despise me too, right!? Then please just let me go---"

"Inoji."

She firmly gripped my face.

And slammed it into the wall.

The whole apartment creaked and it felt like the wall was going to break.

All of the air was forced out of my lungs and I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't say anything.

I couldn't… say anything.

"Don't tell me how I feel."

"Uh……"

"You can say whatever you want about me, you can think whatever you want about me, but don't tell me what to do with your assumptions… Just what are you getting upset about?"

"Uuuuh….."

"It's not me, right?"

She held my face firmly so I couldn't look away.

Miiko-san brought her face close.

Her eyes were sharp.

Please stop.

Stop looking at me with those eyes.

I truly don't like getting involved with other people.

Why does nobody understand?

"Shut up… please. Just stop… already, please. Please forgive me… I'm sorry… Please forgive me….." While exhaling, I forced those words out weakly. "I… said it, right? Did I ask for your pity? Did I say I wanted to get along with you? It's fine already. It's already too late for me. It's all… it's all too late."

"……Hmm."

Miiko-san...

She let go of me.

Ah.

Regrets were piling up in my chest.

I was disappointed.

I was thrown away.

No.

I hate this.

I hate being looked down on.

But I hate being abandoned even more.

Being thought of like that by this person...

By Miiko-san.

"Then you really are no good."

Miiko-san closed her iron fan with a *bam*.

"Then you truly are worthless."

"Ah….."

I knew that.

But having it be told by someone.

Being told that by you.

"A guy who can't even protect one girl, who didn't even try to protect her and just makes excuses doesn't deserve to live. Someone who just wallows in his own incompetence doesn't deserve to live."

And then, she took something out of her fan.

It was a hidden knife.

It looked like a kogatana, but from the shape, it was closer to a shuriken.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to die?"

"....."

"You were always saying things about how there's no meaning to life. You've always been saying pessimistic things like that, haven't you? So then,

I will kill you.

You won't need to live pointlessly anymore."

"....Thats."

No, isn't she right?

It might be as she says.

That's right, what am I doing living pointlessly like this?

I don't need to, right?

There's no need to draw out my life.

If she's gonna kill me, then I might as well get killed.

Oh. So that was it. I didn't want to be consoled, and I didn't want to be blamed.

I wanted to be killed.

"The responsibility for having given you hope… I'll be taking it now. Ah, well, you know. Killing Inoji after finally getting along with you will be hard for me, but that just means your suffering and mine will be equal."

Ah…..

I can't move.

I can't escape.

But I'm not afraid.

Isn't it fine like this?

Huh?

Is it fine?

I… did I get something wrong?

Wait.

Wait a minute.

"One."

Hyun. Miiko-san moved her right arm sharply through the air.

The knife became a blur.

Ah, I'm dead, I thought.

Then.

As I thought that…..

"Two."

Miiko-san's movements weren't finished.

The blade moved back and then moved back and forth, repeatedly.

"Three, four, five, six."

Every time the blade ran through….

My right cheek was cut.

At the same time that the movements finally stopped, all of the cuts opened up at once. An extraordinary amount of blood came pouring out of those six cuts, but… Miiko-san dropped her small blade on the tatami, put her palms on my cheek, and softly, gently, pushed to stop the bleeding.

"There. Like that, you've now died six times."

"....."

The pain in my cheek prevented me from speaking.

I could taste blood in my mouth, even though it should have been closed. It seems that some of those cuts went through my cheek. As expected, the taste of my blood was awful. Awful. It's the first time I've ever tasted such awful blood. It tasted like iron. But the color of the blood covering Miiko-san's hands was neither green nor purple, it

was red.

It wasn't blue either.

A bright red.

"Now you've been reborn six times at once… so if you say some stupid stuff again, you truly are no good. I really will kill you"

"....."

"So what will you do?"

"....I'm not sure." I answered while repressing the pain in my cheek. "But… someone like me, what are you saying I can do?"

"At the very least, you can do more than me."

Miiko-san said straightforwardly.

"I'm incompetent. All I'm good at is swinging a sword. But what about you? There's a lot you can do, right? You… you just haven't been doing the things you can do, haven't you?"

"....Just not doing them……."

"You're sad, aren't you?" Miiko-san said quietly. "You're sad that… Hime isn't here anymore, right? Then just say so. Why are you blaming yourself and screaming at me? That's not what you need to be doing right now, is it?"

Sad?

Is that so?

Am I… sad that Hime-chan died?

Really.

"That's… right."

I said.

I confessed.

It was almost like it was my last words.

"It's just that, Miiko-san, I… until now, I've hurt many people. I've made many miserable, I've made many go through painful experiences, and I've neglected many people. Hime-chan was just another victim of that. At this point, for me… for me to grieve someone's death… I've already forgotten how many I hurt, how many I tricked, how many I deceived, how many I cheated. I've never counted how many I betrayed, how many I used, how many I sold out. I responded to affection with contempt, and responded to love with

hatred. I've never trusted anybody, and I only saw those who trusted in me as liars. No matter what anyone said to me and no matter what I said to anyone, I was completely unaffected. I never thought that someone could ever love me unconditionally. I was an irreparable defective product. It's already been too late for me since a long time ago, so that's why, at this point, for me to feel something like sadness would just be---"

"That's enough!"

With a shout, Miiko-san grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and raised me upwards in an instant. I couldn't reach the floor with my feet, my trachea was completely closed, and I really couldn't breathe.

"Do you think that childish nonsense will get through to me?! Do you think the words of someone who has never had an honest conversation with anyone will resonate in anyone's heart! It must be nice to decide that you can't do anything and act depressed! Try imagining what it's like for me to watch you! Why can't you tell that you won't get anywhere like that!?"

"Miiko… san..."

"I don't care if you're miserable or you're struggling, just do something! Even if it's pathetic, it's far better than doing nothing! Struggle, wriggle, that's fine! Everyone lives while deceiving themselves like that! Don't choose an unfair way of life where you're the only one suffering!"

Miiko-san glared at me.

There were traces of tears in her eyes.

Even as she yelled, her voice choked.

"Listen up! No matter how many you've hurt, how many you've tricked, how many you've deceived, how many you've disrespected, how many you've betrayed, how many you've used, or how many you've sold out! No matter how many you've hurt, or how many you've made miserable! Even if you're a fool, even if you're unsightly! Even if it's too late, even if it's past the point of no return! Even if you're a defective product who can't trust anyone, or a human failure that murders people!"

"...Why would something like that mean that you can't feel sadness?"

"....."

Suddenly.

Something… it felt like something fell.

Suddenly, I felt my body becoming light. Everything that I had been obsessed with until now, everything that had restrained me now felt like it was a thin, brittle cage.

Who had been restraining me? Who held the key to these shackles?

".....You liked Ichihime, didn't you?"

".....Yes"

"It was fun having her around, right?"

".....Yes"

"Thanks to her, you were happy, right?"

".....Yes!"

I….

I nodded with conviction.

Hime-chan.

She was always cheerful like an idiot.

She was selfish and cried a lot.

She was easy to fool, but a liar.

She easily mixed up her words and was bad at studying.

But she was very hard working and was always doing her best.

She was an incredible girl.

Ah, that's right.

These past two months.

They were fun because Hime-chan was there.

Why didn't I notice that until now?

That I was so blessed.

That I was so happy.

Remember it. Remember it all.

Hime-chan's words. Hime-chan's appearance.

Down to the last strand of hair…..

I couldn't forget her even if I tried. It would be so much easier for me to forget her but, even then, I couldn't. How could I have forgotten that even though it was so much fun?

I want to shout it out. Even now, I want to go and tell her with all my heart. That even if it was only for a short while, you've managed to bring joy to a single hopeless person, to someone who had no happiness in his life.

And not to just me.

To Miiko-san and everyone else too.

I'm sure to Aikawa-san too.

What was I born for?

With what meaning was I born?

At the very least… not to feel like this.

If it was to feel like this, then I would rather have not been born. If it was for this pathetic feeling, for the feeling like it would be far better to just die, I would rather have not been born.

That's what I had thought.

I don't have any intention to take it back.

There's no way I could take it back.

I came to think that everything was a mistake.

I came to think that living itself was a mistake.

I came to think that everything was a failure.

I came to think that not dying itself was a failure.

Then why is it?

Really, why is it?

That I still wouldn't wish that I had never known Hime-chan….

"I…."

I said, feeling the taste of blood in my mouth

"The fact that Hime-chan… I really hate it."

"Yeah."

"I'm sad that Hime-chan died."

"Yeah… that's right."

Miiko-san let go of me.

I landed on the ground with a thump.

I was relieved.

The ground was stable.

"I'm sad too."

"....Miiko-san."

I touched my cheek.

It was wet and sticky with blood.

"I… have found something to do."

"Is that so?"

"Something I have to do"

"I see."

Miiko-san gave a small nod.

"You'll be back, right?"

"Yes… but I don't when that will be."

"That doesn't bother me. You can come back home whenever you want." Miiko-san said boldly. "That's because this place is your home, after all."

"....That's right."

I forcefully wiped the blood off my cheek.

Though my clothes were already soaked in blood.

Well, it suits me.

Since the beginning, I've been living as if I was already dead.

Living as if I was dying.

So I'll struggle.

I'll struggle pathetically.

There's hell in front of me, but there's also hell behind me.

Let's turn back the clock and repeat.

I'll continue living.

Like I'm dying. Like I'm already dead.

No matter what anyone else thinks.

So what?

"Well, I'll be going now."

"Yeah. Be careful."

I looked back before leaving.

Miiko-san had her arms crossed as she watched me go.

It looked like she was faintly smiling.

That's right....

I love her smile.

"Miiko-san."

"What is it?"

"When I come back, I'll probably confess to you, so please think about your answer."

"Confess? ….What, do you like me?"

"Yes… about as much as Miiko-san likes me."

"…..That's interesting. That's real interesting, Inoji." Miiko-san said back to me without any hesitation. "Then I'll be waiting here for you to return."

"Yeah… see you then."

Even if we don't have a connection, let's meet again.

With a wave, I left the room, climbed down the stairs, and left the apartment. The night air cooled down the wound on my cheek. It was the perfect summertime temperature for Kyoto.

The blood didn't stop flowing.

Red, red, red, red.

My brain felt clear. It felt as if there was nothing that I couldn't see even in this darkness. I could even differentiate between the cries of the bats in the sky. My nerves were so sensitive that I could even distinguish the feeling of the wind hitting against my skin.

Everything was released.

My everything was released.

Truly….

Exhilarating.

Truly clear.

Truly… a masterpiece.

"Well then, let's get psyched up and… let's go kill, dismember, gather it, line it all up, and expose it."

I headed out.

All the way up the Kamo River.

Beyond to the other side of the mountain.

To the laboratory of Assistant Professor Kigamine.

CHAPTER 9 —— UNCONSCIOUSNESS (CHANGING CEREMONY OF IDLENESS)

0

He had everything she didn’t have, and he didn’t have anything she had.

1

I collapsed three meters away from the apartment.

It was from anemia.

It was from blood loss.

I was bleeding to death.

Kasugai-san, who was passing by (returning from the convenience store. She was carrying bags full of beer in both hands. A hopeless adult.) helped me. Then she and Houko-chan (Kasugai-san woke her up from her sleep. Good job.) both treated me.

".....Are you an idiot?"

Houko-chan’s first words to me when I woke up were harsh.

"The front of the apartment now looks like a murder scene. The stairs and the hallway too. It’s becoming more and more like a haunted house."

"Sorry…."

"It’s not something that can be resolved by apologizing. Anyway, if you’re going out somewhere, wait until after dawn. The cuts are sharp enough that you don't need stitches; by that time, your body will have recovered."

"Thank you for that… Houko-chan"

"No, no. You’re welcome"

"Ikki. You should also thank me."

"....."

It was too bothersome to try to come up with a retort, so I thanked Kasugai-san.

Once morning came, with the top and bottom of my right cheek covered in gauze sandwiched firmly under my eye, I first searched

through my room. Obviously, I wasn't looking for my passport and insurance card. Now then, where did I put it again? After leaving it for about a month, I couldn't really remember where I put it… Ah, that's right. It's behind the ceiling.

"Kasugai-san, could you please act as a chair for a bit?"

"……Lewd."

"That's not it."

"So obscene."

"I said that's wrong."

Well, even though Kasugai-san is taller than me, when I think about it, asking a woman to become a chair goes against societal norms. I didn't have enough free time on my hands to preach about the Equal Employment Opportunity Act. So I gave Kasugai-san a ride on my shoulders (again, that's a pretty bad way to put it), and asked her to get the things I wanted from the ceiling.

"Oh. This is….."

"Yes."

It was two knives and a pistol.

One of the knives was for lock opening and wasn't very deadly. So rather than a knife, it was more of a lock-picking tool. The other one, the one I received from Aikawa Jun, was terribly rugged, but surprisingly thin, like a scalpel for medicinal use. It had the appearance of a pocket knife. Then the gun… it was a Jericho 941. There was no need to explain this one. The cartridge was 41AE, and only three bullets were left.

"That's nostalgic."

Kasugai-san said while gazing at them. I see, come to think of it, in last month's case, she was the one who basically stood alone against me while I had these three weapons equipped.

"That's the weapons we had when we both took down that detestable Shadou Kyouichirou, right?"

"Don't fabricate false memories."

After having checked the bullet count and the state of the pistol, I packed it into my gym bag. As for the knives, I put one (the pocket knife) in the holster on my upper body, and the other (the anti-lock

blade), after thinking about it, I decided to put it together with the gun. Since I had rested for a bit, there was no need to worry about anemia anymore, but in the one in a million chance that I were to fall over and stab my hip, that would be a problem.

"Well, I'm off."

"Yeah. By the way, you won't go see Miiko-san?"

"No…."

Miiko-san had been constantly waiting for me since Kasugai-san came back alone from that research lab, so she was lacking in sleep, and after talking to me, she seemed to be sleeping soundly in her room next door.

"If I saw her now, I would look too uncool… More importantly, Kasugai-san. I have a request."

"What?"

"When you first met Rizumu-chan, you took out that business card, didn't you? Do you still have it?"

"I threw it away"

"....."

This person is the worst.

"But I remember what it said. Want me to write it down?"

"As expected from a science person… I'd appreciate it if you did."

"If you want, I can also come along with you."

"No, it'll be easier to move alone."

"I see."

Kasugai-san said indifferently.

"But Ikki. How should I say it… won't it be bad if you went looking like that?"

"? What do you mean?"

"Well I don't think many people would remember a man as plain and dull as you, but it'd be bad if someone near that place remembered you."

"That's true…." It felt like I was being insulted, but you could certainly say that. "Then just in case, it'd be better to disguise myself. A disguise, huh… What should I do? I cut my hair, so I can't crossdress without a wig…."

"Now that I said it, I feel like the gauze on your face is enough. But it'd be a problem if that attracted too much attention. At least change your clothes and put on a hat. Then Ikki, in regards to that, be careful on the way and also when you arrive."

"Understood."

"I count on you to bring back gifts."

"There won't be any."

I put the bag on my back, left the apartment, headed to the parking lot, put on my helmet, and drove off on my Vespa….

Two hours later.

Assistant Professor Kigamine's research lab.

I arrived at the former Saitou Clinic.

"……Huh?"

When I pulled the Vespa into the parking lot, I noticed that the Fiat, the Katana, and the Z were no longer here. Were they removed as *evidence* during the cover up operation? Impossible. That would be cruel. It's fine for the Fiat and the Katana, but the Z is a pretty old model, so there's a possibility that it'll stay in the garage forever. Setting the Katana aside as it's not mine, the Fiat is a problem.

"Hmm…."

As I thought, I went around the building to the courtyard.

It was beautiful.

There was no pool of blood.

Hime-chan's body was also not there.

"……"

I had prepared myself, so it threw me a bit off my rhythm.

It seems that the *disposal*, the cover up, was complete. Since the time I contacted Kunagisa… um, my sense of time is a bit off… but it should've been the morning before yesterday, so the 48 hours since then was enough for the Kunagisa Syndicate to have finished.

But that's wonderful.

It can disappear without a trace.

"It's as if…."

I was about to say it, but I stopped. There's no way I can say that. It's as if Hime-chan hadn't been alive in the first place. I won't say that

kind of thing even if my mouth was split open.

Even the smell of blood had disappeared.

Still.

".....It's nonsense."

Circling the building, I went around to the entrance.

The sliding door was locked.

"......Good grief."

I took out the lock-picking knife from my bag and used it. After about five second, I unlocked it. I opened the door and entered inside. There were shoes. Kuchiha-chan's shoes. Just that.

"Sorry for the intrusion," I said without any meaning. "Well then, I'll just enter."

First… where to?

I think it was the library.

I walked down the hallway while being quiet and alert. However, any sign of human presence here had been completely erased. It had been eradicated. Kuchiha-chan had been living here alone to begin with, so it's unavoidable that there'd be a few signs of her presence left, but for the most part this was the result of the *cleaning*. The door to the laboratory which I had broken that I passed on the way had also been neatly replaced. And then when I arrived at the door of the library… as expected, it was locked. Again, I opened it using the knife.

There was no one inside.

Assistant Professor Kigamine wasn't reading a book.

Assistant Professor Kigamine's shoulder wasn't torn off.

"......There really wasn't any meaning to coming here."

If it's all tidy and cleaned up like this, there won't be any evidence or anything like an on-site inspection. Well, the idea was for it to be a sort of ritual to get inspiration, which might have ended up being ineffective… but this was indeed overkill.

Well, I was the one who asked for the cover up.

But… setting Kuchiha-chan aside, Assistant Professor Kigamine was what Mikoko-chan called a *famous person*. I wonder how the information was falsified? I don't know since I don't read the newspaper or watch TV. Though, it may all be over already.

It's finished.

That's fine, I'll start over and over any number of times.

Continuing from there, I went to the changing room in order to take a look at the shower room. There was no lock here. I opened the door and went inside. The door behind it had a simple lock, but it was the kind that couldn't be used if there was no one inside, so there was no need to worry about it.

As I was about to turn the knob, I hesitated a little.

The girl who won't die.

The girl who won't die.

What does it mean to not die?

Undying, immortal.

At that time, was she truly dead?

That possibility.

If **at that time she was alive**….

If she was alive.

".....It's not something that I can do anything about though, right?"

I shook off that ridiculous delusion and opened the door.

Her body, which should have had it's upper and lower half separated, was….

Not there.

Not anywhere.

".....Well, she's dead."

Kunagisa told me everything about her circumstances without hiding anything. Her corpse was recovered by the Kunagisa Syndicate and will surely continue to be experimented on.

It's pitiable.

No, is it pitiable?

That's… everything that happens after death, everything that happens after you die, all of it is nothing more than our selfish delusions. Did I just think that because I didn't get along with Kuchiha-chan?

But.

Obviously, there weren't enough words between me and Kuchiha-chan for me to feel anything more for her. I should have spoken much

more with Kuchiha-chan about various things.

I didn't have much time.

There wasn't any other way to say it.

"....."

I closed the door and left the changing room.

Next is the second floor.

Going back to the hallway, I climbed the stairs up to the second floor.

The hospital room near the stairs.

Niounomiya Rizumu, Niounomiya Izumu.

The Niounomiya siblings.

I opened the door and went inside.

Naturally, it was completely clean inside.

There was no beheaded corpse with a hole in its chest.

"I'm beaten…."

Was there no point in coming all this way?

I left the room and went to the hospital room next door. In other words, the room where Hime-chan and I had spent a night in. Nobody was killed in this room, so you could say that there was no reason to see it.

When I entered inside, of course, it was as we left it.

I couldn't tell if it was cleaned or not… Ah, no, it seems it was cleaned. The bed was back as it was. It didn't have the shape of Hime-chan made by a futon inside a futon, it was cleanly made. A clean white sheet was spread out without even one wrinkle.

".....Hmm?"

Which reminds me… **that**, what was that?

When I woke up, I mistook *that* for Hime-chan. It's clear that at that point, Hime-chan was no longer in the room. However… however, what about when I came back to my room at night? At that time, was it Hime-chan that I saw? If you asked me whether she was deep inside the futon, I wouldn't know how to answer. But even if I didn't see her, there's no guarantee that Hime-chan wasn't there at the time……

"Guarantee, huh….."

I laid down on the bed.

I closed my eyes for a moment and thought.

Or rather, it was closer to remembering than to thinking.

"Why did Hime-chan do that? Maybe it wasn't Hime-chan… and another person did it… so that I wouldn't notice?"

But why?

For someone to do something that flashy just to **hide it from me**… More than not understanding the meaning behind it, it was just eerie.

That was one of the things that was on my mind.

But there was also one more.

Obviously, it was something even more out of place in comparison to the others.

Unnatural, supernatural.

"**At that time, that cannibal… which person was it**?"

In the middle of the night, after taking a shower and talking with Assistant Professor Kigamine, we passed each other by the stairs. Was that actually Izumu-kun, Rizumu-chan, or… **was it neither of them**?

It seemed empty.

Like zero.

"But… they didn't say anything about having a third personality. Neither Rizumu-chan nor Izumu-kun."

No, wait.

Having a third one that no one knows about, would that be unthinkable? After all, Rizumu-chan perceived *the person* that is Izumu-kun as *someone else*. By the same logic, that would mean that if there was a third person… if there was a third person that neither Rizumu-chan or Izumu-kun knew about, then that wouldn't be weird, right?

".....Hmm"

…….That was just an idea, but was it an unlikely one? If you thought that there was someone with two personalities, but it turned out to be someone with three personalities. The existence of a third personality that no one knows about, setting the *great detective* aside, would that not work out to be as much of a threat as the *professional*

killer?

Wouldn't that be a useful trick?

No… Even then, there's still Shiogi-chan's information. That Shiogi-chan of a thousand forms who had fought a thousand battles, it's hard to think that she'd be fooled by a trick of that level… Something like fooling your allies before your enemies, in regards to that girl, that would be like preaching philosophy to Confucius.

I mean, that third personality, let's name him Hizumu-kun, if he existed, what would that change? That wouldn't change anything, would it? No matter how many personalities you have, in the end, there's only one body, and it can only do one thing. It's not like it had four or six arms. The trick of having multiple personalities and expanding them might be good for the *professional killer*, but for the case in itself, there doesn't seem to be much point in thinking about it.

That means I'm at a loss….

Suddenly, I reached a dead end.

"……Before Aikawa-san finds out… she said I only had three days… um… it's a bit confusing from when it's three days, but I guess that would be the day after tomorrow."

If possible, I'd like to get this over with before that.

To tell the truth, the best idea would be for me to contact her… but to be honest, I don't think I'd be able to face her. But after subtracting that sense of self-preservation from the equation, it doesn't mean that absolutely nothing was left. Hypothetically, if I made Aikawa-san show up, then at once, thoroughly and completely, without leaving a single blade of grass, this case *would be concluded*.

I want to avoid that.

I at least want to do something.

Maybe that's just ego.

I don't know what Hime-chan wishes for. Wanting to know what a dead person is thinking, that would be ego. Furthermore, using a dead person as an excuse is even worse. Ego is not good.

It's not good, but.

"I want to do whatever I can. Hmm, those words smell a lot like excuses……"

And.

I heard a sound then.

Without raising myself up from the bed, all at once, a signal ran through my body. That sound… what was it? Was it the sound of the front door opening? I worked my over-sensitive nerves to their maximum. The sound. The sound. Locate the sound, focus.

Kishi…… kishi…… kishi…… kishi…… kishi…....

The hallway… is it walking though it? The sound stopped. As I thought that, I heard the sound of a sliding door opening. There was no sound of it closing, and the sound of a door being opened somewhere continued at an interval.

…….Is it inspecting the rooms?

A person from the Kunagisa Syndicate? Impossible. No matter how you look at it, all of the cleaning should have been completely finished. And I reported to Kunagisa before coming here. If there was any movement, then Kunagisa would have told me at that time.

Kishi-

I heard a sound of someone stepping on the stairs. *Kishi- kishi- kishi- kishi-*, the sound continued. It was coming up to the second floor. At that point, as one would expect, I rose up and got off the bed. I took out the knife from its holster.

The sound of the neighbouring door opening.

Is it checking in order?

The sound of it closing.

Next… it'll come here.

I readied my knife. I didn't have the time to draw my gun.

"....."

I waited for the door to open.

Then.

"----Pon"

It opened.

Standing there was the fox-masked man.

A fox mask and white clothes.

"You… have we met somewhere?" The fox-masked man twisted his head vaguely. "Hmm. No, I see. The vespa outside… I thought I had seen it somewhere. Now that I think about it, it has the same license plate."

"……..You."

"'You,' hmm."

The fox-masked man shifted his mask and revealed his true face. His face closely resembled that of a certain person I knew. With that face and those eyes, he looked at me.

"For our ties to reunite in a place like this, very fascinating. Don't you think so?"

"Ah, no. I--"

"For now, put down that dangerous thing."

"Ah. Yes……"

"Kukkukku."

The fox-masked man.

Laughed as if he were committing a crime.

2

After moving from the hospital room to the waiting room, the fox-masked man and I sat down on the cushions across the table from each other. I made some tea in the kitchen and served it. The fox-masked man took his mask off and sipped his tea.

"Rizumu and Izumu didn't come home, you see."

"Oh… now that you mention it… they said that they were currently in your care."

"I'm not really from Kyoto either. It was just part of my roots… and I had asked Rizumu to do a job for me. Regarding *here*, I had her investigate the research that Kigamine… the assistant professor was conducting in this place."

"....."

"And she didn't come back. That probably means that something happened *here*, so I went to see."

"With that Porsche, right?"

"Yeah. I'm not particular about it, but it's an old favorite."

"Um… Mr. Fox, you knew about Izumu-kun, right? *Rizumu* of the Niounomiya and *Izumu* of the Niounomiya… about the front and back union theory."

"'Front and back union theory.' Hmm. That's a nice expression. It seems you're familiar with it," the fox-masked man said. "Well, roughly, yes. If you're asking whether I know it or not, then I know it. Otherwise, I wouldn't *keep* someone like that."

"....."

"Originally, I didn't want to come to such a rural area, but it seems like there was some kind of cover-up. From the fact that Rizumu came here and vanished. In that case, there's no use in talking about it **from afar**. That's why I came here, as you can see, but… earlier you said 'they said,' right?"

"....."

"You seem to know something."

The fox-masked man said with a confident tone.

"Tell me."

"……Something… even if you say that."

It's strange.

Even though the Kunagisa Syndicate did a cover-up… even if they were still in the middle of it, it's strange for this man to appear like this on the scene. I've been thinking about this since a moment ago. To begin with, a cover-up operation is meant to make it feel like there wasn't a cover-up, so how did the fox-masked man notice it?

I wonder how.

It's strange.

It's unnatural.

It's impossible.

If there were a possibility… it would mean that this man is located outside of the political power of the Kunagisa Syndicate….

That kind of speculation made me nervous.

Watch out, don't let your guard down.

And at the same time.

At the same time, it made me think that **I shouldn't let this slip**.

There might be some clue.

This man was the employer of the Niounomiya siblings.

"Well… when you sent Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun here, I was also there. For an aptitude test for a part-time job….."

"Hmm. I see. And so?"

"Before I talk about that, one thing." The fox-masked man urged me to continue, but I carefully opened my mouth. "Do you mind if I told you about some speculation that came to mind?"

"Let's hear it."

"You are… Saitou-san, the former head of this place when it was a clinic, is that right?"

"...Ho." The fox-masked man put back on the mask he had set aside. "Did you hear that from **those two**? Let's hear what makes you think that."

"It's close to guesswork… I just guessed it from Assistant Professor Kigamine's and Kuchiha-chan's story, and also from Izumu-kun's story. Also, the reaction you had when you heard Assistant Professor

Kigamine's name last time… and finally, the orders you issued to Rizumu-kun and Izumu-chan. What was hidden behind 'investigate this lab' and 'kill Kigamine Yaku and Madoka Kuchiha.' That's about all of the ingredients for that deduction."

"I swear, every one of them has a loose tongue….." The fox-masked man said as if he was fed up. "Especially the Niounomiya siblings. They were useful, but… they were both too high energy. However, there's also those that are too cool… especially if the cool side is just a thin mask that's hiding a hot nature on the inside… Now that I think about it, Junya was a good example of that."

"Junya?"

"Hmm. No, sorry, it's the name of an old friend. That person was quite gloomy, but also strangely passionate. Really, I couldn't handle him… Hmm. Well, you should put your heart into it as well. Anyway, it's just that it's easier to use guys that are easy to follow. Of course, as an absolute condition, they need to be somewhat clever or else they'd just be a problem. You can't use an idiot."

"....."

"By the way, that question you asked earlier… I can only answer yes to half of it. Saying no would also only be half correct. That's because I'm truly that *Saitou-san*.

"Eh……."

"You're surprised, huh"

Shrugging his shoulders, the fox-masked man made a jest-like gesture.

Then continuing, he turned and looked around.

"This place hasn't changed… it's as if the flow of time has stopped. Nothing has changed from twenty years ago."

"Twenty years….."

That's probably the result of Kuchiha-chan's feelings.

She had taken care of this place for the past two decades. Letting this place remain stagnant, just like her body.

For what purpose?

It's surely...

"I was nearly twenty years old at that time. I was a professor in

some impressive university… it was such a colorful job that it makes me laugh. Like a star attraction."

"....."

I know of someone who had received a doctorate at the elementary school stage, so I'm not that surprised by a twenty year old professor at this point. However, this man went on to become *Saitou*… Assistant Professor Kigamine's and also Kuchiha-chan's *mentor*. I hadn't considered that at all. It was completely unexpected.

Suddenly, I lost my words.

Meanwhile, the fox-masked man continued eloquently.

"For me, being a professor was more of a side job, and the clinic I opened here was going to be my main job… but society's assessment of that was lukewarm. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations couldn't be avoided no matter where I went. Setting that aside, Kigamine…Yaku. And Madoka Kuchiha. That's nostalgic… until you made me hear that name again last time, I had completely forgotten about them. I didn't think they were still holed up in this place *continuing after me*."

".....Those two, they were waiting for you."

Even though they didn't say it.

Even then, they were waiting for him.

For someone. For something.

Madly. Lovingly.

"There's nothing I could've done. I had completely forgotten about them," the fox-masked man said candidly. "Well, there's also something wrong with me… I should have remembered with just 'Kyoto.' Now that I think about it, the source of who I am now was that *girl who cannot die*… Humans can forget where they came from. That's a surprise."

".....Setting aside the fact you had forgotten," I said. "If you're Saitou-san, then all the more, why try to kill those two? Why do that… why did you employ Izumu-kun?"

"That's a misunderstanding, a misleading statement. I didn't really try to kill them… because it's like they were already dead twenty years ago. If they had failed to die, then it was just to finish them… or

at least I was asking for that kind of nuance... I said it earlier, didn't I? I'm cleaning up after the things from when I was still young and inexperienced. The responsibility for having given them hope… I need to take it. Well, saying such things to Izumu won't get through to him. That guy only listens to about half of half of half of what anyone is saying."

"……Izumu-kun"

"That's why he needs Rizumu. That Izumu, it's already too late for any sort of conventional weapon to stop his mayhem. It's not one against a thousand. If you know how to use him, he's a berserker who could win a war alone. Did you hear about why both of his arms are restrained?"

"Um… if he doesn't do that, he won't be able to control himself. I heard something like that, but…."

"Niounomiya Izumu, the *Man Eater*. He has his family's treasured sword, a one-hit sure kill technique called *Eating One*… it's an inhuman technique where he uses the arms he normally keeps sealed. Honestly, even when I saw it used in front of me, I was shaken. You could say he's the greatest masterpiece out of all of the Niounomiya's history… although, that would be in a few years, however. To be called the greatest masterpiece, he still lacks some history and achievements… furthermore, even then, Rizumu's support is essential."

"Rizumu-chan… her body… it's weird to put it like this, but when she becomes like that, isn't it dangerous for her? You said support, but she has no fighting ability on her side, does she?"

"……You don't understand. What I find to be scarier is Rizumu rather than Izumu. Killing such a baby-like kid… such a weak kid. To *kill* such a cute and small kid like that is more unbearable than you think. The guilt of killing a weakling that's not even an enemy, killing something that has the form of a human, you know what I mean, right? In reality, even you, unintentionally, probably 'out of character,' saved Rizumu-chan."

"……"

"It's the strength of weakness… being strong is weak and being

weak is strong. Didn't Izumu say something like that? It's not like she didn't have any skill as a detective, but… more accurately, Rizumu was Izumu's **defensive form**. Both in a physical sense… and also in a psychological sense."

"……But then, Rizumu-chan… she was too pitiful. No, it might be weird to say pitiful for an artificially created personality, but……"

"Pitiful, huh… You're a relatively quick witted fellow, but you don't seem to understand the most important point……" The fox-masked man's tone was one of ridiculing me for my misunderstanding. "In regards to the Niounomiya siblings, the Niounomiya siblings' assassination technique, Izumu and Rizumu, which do you think is the *back* and which do you think is the *master*?"

"That's… Izumu-kun, right?"

"You fool."

I was flatly rejected with a good amount of emotion.

The fox-masked man laughed, "Kukkukku."

"Even though Izumu and Rizumu are artificially created personalities that were deliberately divided into strength and weakness respectively, ultimately, they only have a very short amount of time where they act as a killer. They're not serial killers, so they don't work around the clock spending 24 hours a day killing people. In other words, the time that the *Man Eater* spends on the surface is only an hour. Based on the view of the general public, that's a very small amount of time. The *shadow* is rather at the back, on Izumu's side."

"……."

"For the Niounomiya siblings, the time spent as the *Carnival* is far greater. I'm not saying that time is everything, but… even though we're talking about front and back, it's the same for them."

"……A pair as one."

"One as a pair. The Niounomiya siblings."

Supporting each other…

Their relationship is too one-sided.

That's what I thought.

But that's not it.

What Rizumu-chan was for Izumu-kun.

What Izumu-kun was for Rizumu-chan.

It's not a matter of thinking.

It's something beyond logic.

I was made to think a little.

The fox-masked man went "Hmm," adding in a break.

"The conversation has strayed. Let's go back."

"……Yeah… that's right. Then let me ask you a question, you said that Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan *failed to die*, what did you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. It's not really something I want to explain to an outsider… well, I guess you're not that much of an outsider. Asking only what I want to ask would be unreasonable." The fox-masked man prefaced with that, and then continued. "You see, I should have **killed** them twenty years ago… no, that's wrong. From the world's perspective, saying I *threw them away* would be more accurate---I *abandoned them*. Right, those are the words… that's the correct answer. *I abandoned those two*."

"…..I still don't understand."

"*Researching not dying*. That was originally my subject… I'm sure you heard it from Kuchiha, but it was my subject. Let's see, it'll be a bit of an embarrassing story, but… when I was about twenty years old. In other words, when I was about your age."

"I'm nineteen and a half."

"'I'm nineteen and a half.' Hmm. Then that's exactly it… The me at that time really, really *didn't want to die*. If I were to put it plainly, I wanted to live a long life."

"…….Oh……"

I thought that was something everyone wanted, but now that I think about it, being possessed by that kind of thing at the age of twenty or so is surprisingly rare. It's not just me, young and immature people are quite nihilistic. Finding meaning in a long life happens later once you've matured a bit.

"I tried to calculate it once. Everything that I held an interest in, how much time was needed to know all of it without leaving

anything. What came out was an astronomically large number. At the very least, with the human age limit of 120 years, it wasn't enough. That was where I ended up with the speed of my thinking and computational ability. It was quite a stupid calculation."

"Huh….."

"It's not that I was afraid to die, though. I was afraid of not having enough time to live. Ending without knowing what I wanted to know. Dying while having things I didn't know, that would've been unacceptable."

"So… *researching not dying*, huh."

"Meeting Kuchiha was what you would call a *coincidence*. Just a coincidence. Well, let's just say that there was someone *raising* Kuchiha-chan before me."

"…..A connection between researchers, is that it?"

"No. Before that, Kuchiha-chan was more of a pet of a nouveau riche. By the way, it seems that you've met Kuchiha. How was she? How old did she appear?"

"Seventeen… seventeen or eighteen. About that."

"Then it's the same as me," the fox-masked man said. "When I also first met her, Kuchiha was about that age in physical appearance. If you can't believe it, then inside the diagnosis room… well, it's now the *laboratory*, try to go there. There should be some pictures left… from twenty years ago."

"Then… being a pet."

"**It has that meaning**. A meaning just as hellish and dark as what you're imagining. No matter what, someone who can't die will always be treated as some sort of strange creature. Though, she didn't receive a monstrous treatment, so she was still on the human path, I guess… even just staying alive with no physical defects is paradise. Buying her cost me quite a lot, you know. It seems they had an attachment towards Kuchiha… no matter the form, being loved may not be a bad thing, but thanks to that the price went up by a lot. I had to use all of the wealth that I had saved up."

"……"

It was a story that didn't concern itself with human rights or

ethics.

The problem being what it was, I guess there was nothing that could be done.

"And… for about six month, I was with Kuchiha… while being helped by a supporter named Kigamine… hmm. Kigamine, huh. For some reason we got along well… if she had any talent, I'm sure we could have walked together… I never thought that she was continuing by herself. Incompetence is humanity's tragedy."

"Why did you stop... the research on Kuchiha-chan?"

"Because I realized that it was futile," the fox-masked man said flatly. "It was an anomaly that happens only once in an era. She herself only had about 60 years of memory, but... well, that seemed to be the limit of her. Rather than capacity, it's a simple memory limit. Even you don't remember the memories of when you were a kid ten years ago. It's that kind of thing… Kuchiha had about 800 years. From what I could find out with hypnotherapy, she lived for about 800 years. Even just that should be a highly valued *phenomenon,* but… Kukkukku, despite having lived 800 years, she had quite a vulgar personality. Though, whether it be 800 years or 1000 years, if just living made you enlightened, then no one would meditate. You also seem to have a bias on her outward appearance… hmm. 800 years. It should be a highly valued *phenomenon*, but her existence will definitely not occur again. To begin with, Kuchiha had abilities close to a human, but… her body was health itself. It had a high ability to build immunity, and her regenerative abilities were out of the norm. However, she lacked reproductive capabilities. In other words, she couldn't leave any descendants. It would be different if we could clone humans, but… even then, it would require precise technology to exactly copy Kuchiha's abnormal cells. In short, her *deathless body* couldn't be applied towards anything else."

"……That's why you abandoned them"

"I didn't say that to them, though. Maybe they didn't even know they'd been abandoned. But I didn't give up on my goal because of that… I just moved on to the next stage. But that next stage was also a failure… it wasn't just a failure, it was a true disaster. I told you that

before. Now I'm on the next… of the next of the next stage. **That was why I employed Rizumu to search for Zerozaki**… but it seems that was also a misfire. Furthermore, this case should have been just a simple settlement, but for some reason Rizumu and Izumu didn't come back, so I was wondering what I should do."

"....."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki

He was... at that stage?

"Well, it's a good story for me to think about, but... I find it a little pitiable that those two were still continuing. I might be a piece of garbage, but even I have some compassion. How should I put it… it's like the feeling you get when you see a computer trying to calculate the decimals of pi… or the tragedy of the waterfowl… or like a ghost trying to draw water with a dipper without a bottom… or like a satellite eternally revolving around Earth… that kind of image. Anyway, whether I requested it or not... nothing would change. For the people obeying *the Story*, they would either die at a different point or live a life no different from a corpse. Either they die or they don't. So I figured it'd be better to die. I thought that it was mercy. It's what you'd call an assisted suicide, I guess. To be honest, a part of me also wanted to erase my past."

"Following *the Story*, huh. Just for that reason, you tried to kill two people?"

"I wonder, for what reason can I kill two people? If it becomes 200 million people, then can I kill them without holding up a sign about justice or peace? It's the same thing, so for me, it's sufficient." The fox-masked man did not show any guilt. "Furthermore, one of them *wasn't a person.*"

".....Right"

"Ho. I was prepared for at least one moral complaint, but you're surprisingly calm."

"It seems useless to say it to you. Also….."

"Also, things didn't go as I planned."

The fox-masked man pointed at me.

"My explanation should be enough with that. If I went too much

into the details, it would violate their privacy… Besides, it's an old story. It's from twenty years ago, so there are surely some mistakes in my memory. There's nothing less interesting than listening to the misremembering of a personal story. Now, I'd like to hear about the situation from your side. What exactly happened to Izumu and Rizumu, tell me."

"I understand……" I said. "But regarding that, I also… don't want to mix up a personal story, so it'll be a broad outline. Is that fine?"

"I don't mind. I also don't want to listen to boring stories."

"Then I'll tell you."

I explained to the fox-masked man the whole story from the evening of the 15th to the early morning of the 16th. Because the fox-masked man is outside the Kunagisa Syndicate's cover-up operation, he couldn't have known what happened without employing someone like Chii-kun… Besides interjecting from time to time, he listened to my story. It was impossible for me to read the expression he had under his mask, but to the very end, it felt like he was very intrigued. There was no obligation for me to tell him that I (well, the Kunagisa Syndicate) was the one to do the cover-up, so I mixed in a suitable lie for that part.

"Hmm."

After having heard the whole story, the fox-masked man said.

"I see… Killed twice, the Niounomiya siblings, right."

He mumbled while appearing to be completely serene. There was no air of mourning, it was just as if he was confirming the facts.

"……Is it fine if I take a few minutes to ask some more questions? There were a couple of points in your story that were critically lacking in information."

"If it's only a few, it doesn't bother me."

"That Yukariki Ichihime… I know that name. If I remember correctly, she was also the existence called *Signal Yellow* or something like that."

"No, I don't know if she was called something like that… We didn't have that close of a relationship."

"'We didn't have that close of a relationship.' Then how about I put

it like this… that Yukariki Ichihime, didn't she pair up with Shisei Yuma, the existence known as *Zig Zag*?"

"……So you know about it."

It's not that surprising that he knows about Sumiyuri Academy since he has employed one of the professional killers of the Niounomiya. However, even Izumu the *Man Eater* didn't arrive at that point just from hearing the name Yukariki Ichihime….

"I knew it. Then that girl, she uses *string techniques*… and also with skill equal to that of *Zig Zag*…."

"……What about it?"

"No, I'm just surprised at how many people you knew. It's not just Kigamine and Kuchiha, you even knew *Zig Zag*'s disciple."

The fox-masked man paused as if building suspense, then said.

"To call it a coincidence… it'd be too much."

"…..It is a coincidence. That kind of thing."

"Hmm. I wonder. You may think that you're responsible for the death of Yukariki Ichihime, but that's wrong. The fact that she died here means that she would have died somewhere else...taking the name of *Signal Yellow*. Even if she didn't die here, sooner or later she would have suffered from something holding the same meaning as 'death' for you. What you should grieve about Yukariki Ichihime's death is that you involved yourself with it."

"That's……"

Can I deny it?

What the fox-masked man just said to me was the same as what I had asked Izumu-kun to do. That if he was to kill Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan, he should do it in a place I didn't know and had nothing to do with me… Asking him to **just not kill them in front of me**… the meaning of that isn't that different from what he said, is it?

For example, if Hime-chan had died in a car accident or from illness, would I have gone so far?

But.

Such an assumption.

What is the meaning of such regret?

"There is no meaning… no meaning. The only thing that has meaning is the process of accumulating results. In other words, the Story, the tale. It's the same for Kigamine and Kuchiha. In this part of the Story, regardless of whether they had died or not, it would've been the same as if they had died anyway because that's how the plot was written."

"Story, huh? You said something like that last time too….."

"It seems that you're still looking lightly on the existence of the Story. Well, it's fine even if you don't believe me… but, for example, based on the story I heard earlier, that wasn't the first time you had met Izumu. It seems you had first met him somewhere else… Ah, that's my second question. Where did you meet Izumu for the first time?"

"……Um, I found him earlier at night… when he had collapsed."

"I see. Right, right, it's probably that. Hey, Onii-san. That too… don't you think it's too much to be a coincidence? That just before you had saved Izumu who had collapsed, you saved Rizumu who had also collapsed."

"No… that's not it. The one who saved Rizumu-chan was, er, a biologist who was in the middle of going home."

"Ah, Kasugai Kasuga, right? That's another famous person… though, that one's a famous *weirdo*. It doesn't matter. If Kasugai Kasuga hadn't picked her up, then you would have. Even if you didn't pick her up, some friend of yours would have and you would have come to know her. Otherwise..."

"The story wouldn't progress."

The fox-masked man asserted.

"……"

"Ah, and also… it's correct to say that Rizumu had collapsed, but Izumu hadn't, he was *hunting*"

"……Hunting?"

"He's become too used to being a professional killer. That straitjacket was a restraint that was imposed on him so that he wouldn't overdo it during his *hunting*. It's not unusual for it to be common among the inhabitants of that world… especially in his case since he made Rizumu carry all of his *weakness*. If he doesn't hunt regularly, if he doesn't *devour people* daily, he won't be able to keep his personality stable."

"……."

The time of massacre is one hour a day .

……I guess that wasn't entirely a joke.

"Let's just say that he was a *workaholic* who got carried too far by momentum and became *a murder addict*. It was for the best that I picked him up from the Ninomiya Massacre Magic Group when they couldn't handle him."

"Hah….."

It's like I was hearing a story from another world again.

Who exactly is this fox-masked man….

Which world is he a resident of?

"Focus more on the fact that you were chosen as the prey of that *hunt*… What do you think about that? I think it's part of the Story, but you don't seem to think that. Don't you get it… it's not a matter of probability."

"Not a matter of probability?"

"It's not about probability at all. I told you before, it's Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative. You may think that meeting me here, in this place, is just a coincidence, **but it's not**. At this point in time, you already possess a shallow connection with Kigamine and Kuchiha, and the reason why Kigamine was interested in you was also related to me. Between you and me, there's Niounomiya Rizumu, Niounomiya Izumu, Kigamine Yaku, and Madoka Kuchiha which exist as branches to a flowchart. With that, it would've been weirder if we didn't meet. **No matter how**, in the end, you and I would have a link."

"A link…?"

"To put it strongly, it's the uncertainty principle. **Not one of them is more correct… in this world, everything is correct**. It breaks the

world and humans down to the quantum level, integrates it, differentiates it, interprets it, and ultimately proves it. That's the closest I can come to expressing my goal at the moment, that's the limit of how much I can express in words. Yes, no matter how it happens, everything will eventually converge towards a single, predetermined point. Even if the flowchart may branch out infinitely, in the end everything will converge on a single point. That final point---I call it the Dying Epilogue"

"....."

"I want to see it"

The tone of the fox-masked man.

It wasn't at all as if he was talking about a dream. It was a serious tone that didn't allow for rebuttal.

"......For me, it's a worthless story……" After thinking about it for a bit, I expressed my feelings honestly. "Even if that was the case… Even if what you're saying is true, there's no room for me to enter into that story."

"'There's no room for me to enter.' Hmm. Even if you don't say it, it's still a difficult problem for me… It's fundamentally contradictory to be an observer in this world of quantum mechanics."

".....Are your questions over?"

"Mm… Oh, yes. Only those two points piqued my interest." The fox-masked man nodded. "Though, my second question was just out of curiosity and the one that really mattered was the first one, the one concerning Signal Yellow… Hmm. I see… So that's what happened. Well, it's not an incomprehensible story. The caged bird won't be satisfied just by jumping forever. Hmm, that feeling… well, it's not like I don't understand it."

"......What?"

"No. Thank you, I'll give you my thanks. I feel much better now. I'll be going home… You should do the same too. Even if you stay here, you won't gain anything. This place…..

is already finished.

It no longer has any connection to the Story."

"…..But"

"First of all, you already checked yourself, right? I don't know who did it, but a cover-up means that there won't be any trace of what happened left."

"But… aren't you curious? About how the result of the *massacre* you requested became so messed up? Even if not for that, then the connection you had with Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun…."

"That was the case earlier. That's why I came here."

The fox-masked man said.

"But that's all over now."

"What was unclear has been cleared to an overwhelming degree."

"…….Eh?"

"Honestly, it kind of hurts. Among the *Thirteen Stairs*, Izumu and Rizumu served me the most. What do you call this feeling, again? ….Attachment, yes, attachment. Longing, yes, longing. In that sense, it's not like there aren't some things to think about, but there's nothing that can be done about something that has already ended. All I can do is clap my hands to make as much noise as possible and then leave my seat in silence. Silence… Kukkukku, just silence. It seems that both Rizumu and Izumu desire that from me… It's been a long relationship, so I'll at least give them that as a parting gift."

"Then, that means, Mr. Fox, in other words……"

"Yeah… Though, unlike Rizumu, I'm not a great detective or some weird anomaly. It's not like I've come up with an answer with just reasoning or anything. Nevertheless…." The fox-masked man said, choosing his words. "**If I put together the information I knew in advance with what I heard in your story, I can roughly imagine the gist of what happened.**"

"The gist, you say……"

"Yes, **the gist**. I still don't know **what** did the cover-up. Hmm. I can imagine the general image… I can imagine it exactly. When it's this beautifully clean, proof and evidence mean nothing. Furthermore,

everything you said wasn't necessarily true, and there's also still the possibility that the information I knew beforehand was false… Well, I just wanted to say that last part as a way of self-concealment. In this world, there are countless fools who don't get self-concealment, but from what I saw, you don't seem to be one of them. In short, it's just irresponsible speculation, though, there's probably no error." The fox-masked man said that much and stood up from the cushion. "That said, I can't really tell it to you. There are certain things you shouldn't tell someone just because they want you to, and certain things you shouldn't answer just because they asked you to. At the very least, you shouldn't blurt out other people's secrets. You understand that at least, right? Unlike the others, I have a tight mouth."

"....."

That I understood.

I understood it enough to understand it too much.

"But it's not the type of question that can't be answered by thinking. That's why, Onii-san, instead of thinking here, I think it'd be much better for you to think at home. If you stay in this finished place, you'll just get depressed. What would you be doing now if I hadn't come along?"

"What I was going to do… you say? For starters," I looked at my gym bag. "I was thinking about going to the address written on the business card I got when I first met Rizumu-chan…."

If there was a chance.

If there was a chance, I wanted to meet you.

I was thinking about finding something, any sort of information on you, even if it wasn't anything concrete like a place of residence or something like that.

But I won't say that.

If I say that, I'd be admitting it.

That even if I hadn't met the fox-masked man here, eventually, at some time that isn't now, at some place that isn't here, we would have had the same conversation as we had here and now. I would be admitting that.

"That's no use," the fox-masked man said simply. "I'm not saying

that that address doesn't exist, but it's just a temporary residence. It's just one of the many hideouts of the Niounomiya siblings. Even if you shamelessly call there 24 hours a day all year long, you'll just get the answering machine."

"……Is that so."

I sighed.

It felt like I was already at a dead end… Aside from having Kunagisa ask Nao-san to let me talk directly to the people who did the *cleaning* if it came to it, I didn't have any other move. Considering this wasn't a case that Kunagisa was involved in, I didn't feel too good about borrowing the Kunagisa Syndicate's help, but if I don't have any other move… then is it okay? If what the fox-masked man said was true, this might not be a case that can be solved with that kind of effort or that kind of work.

Inspiration.

A leap in the way of thinking.

Psychological.

What I need is a theory that works on paper.

Methodology over logic.

Magic more abnormal than logic.

What I need is that counterfeit magic.

"...However, that kind of ad hoc idea, that kind of nonsense, is my specialty."

"Is that so. Then it's only a matter of time. If you're the kind of person that can find the answer, then no matter what happens, you'll find it someday."

"Yes… but even if you say that I'll find it someday, I only have about two days left. That's the deadline I've set for myself."

"If it's something you decided yourself, then you'll need to do your best. I also had one of my worries disappear, so now I'll be able to move on to the next stage with some peace of mind… I don't know what to do, I haven't found my footing yet. I don't think the methodology of this approach is wrong, but… either way, if I don't have the key, the door won't open… Maybe instead of the key, it's the knob that doesn't exist in this case….."

"....."

The next stage.

Stage.

Point.

Should I ask or not?

I hesitated, but if I missed this opportunity, I wouldn't have another chance, so I decided to ask.

"……The man you had Rizumu-chan investigate, *Zerozaki Hitoshiki*… listening to what you said earlier, it doesn't seem like you were looking for him just out of curiosity. It seems there was a firm objective… Last time you just said 'I wanted to get involved……'"

"You're strangely obsessed with that"

The fox-masked man seemed a little suspicious. Certainly, my obsession with *Zerozaki Hitoshiki* was, from his perspective, abnormal, if not bizarre.

"Well it's fine… No, that's correct. Without any lie, it was just that. I **just wanted to get involved** with that person called Zerozaki Hitoshiki. I only learned about Zerozaki Hitoshiki recently. Hmm, it got my interest… Let me explain a little." The fox-masked man sat back down on the cushion. "Under the organization that the Niounomiya siblings came from, the Massacre Magic Group, the Nionomiya Troupe, there are several organizations with similar structures… one of them is the *Sawarabi*."

"Yeah….."

Sawarabi.

The meaning probably isn't "a layer of colors."

If I remember correctly, in the Ten Uji Chapters in the Tale of Genji… the one where Nakagimi goes to Tokyo, was called *Sawarabi*[6]. To be honest, I don't really remember.

"I heard from Izumu that the *Sawarabi* had a head-on battle with Zerozaki. It was just something that made my antenna react… Even more than *Cloud Smeared in Purple* or *Mind Render*, it was the name of Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The other day, Rizumu told me about the serial killings Zerozaki Hitoshiki had committed in Kyoto. More precisely, about the head-on battle that happened just before that. And then,

with Rizumu's help, I looked into the details here and there and found that he has a really interesting destiny. Rather than interesting… he possesses a destructive destiny."

"....You mentioned that the other day."

The demon child who was born from the incetuous union of two Zerozaki.

The purest among the purest of serial killers.

"Yeah. I thought that perhaps this being called Zerozaki Hitoshik could be the first step in observing the story without participating in it."

"....."

"I first got that idea from Kuchiha. She told you, right? That Kigamine hired you for that kind of reason... 'I don't affect anyone,' she said something like that, didn't she? If we go back, that was originally my line."

"So… you tried to give an explanation for her *deathless body* there."

"Yeah. Well, saying that it had no effect was a bit of an over exaggeration… Kigamine might have explained it, but the human body, or rather, the animal body is programmed to die. Without searching for a way to reprogram that, immortality is impossible. It's not like even you have never thought about why living things die in the first place, either."

".....It's about the diversity of species, right? In other words, the death of an individual doesn't mean the death of the collective… that's the meaning."

We commonly say things like "this year's cold was quite bad," but from a biological standpoint, that's true for every year. Every year, viruses and bacteria transform and evolve into something more powerful, something that humans are not yet immune to. If you don't look at human beings as individuals but instead arrange them as a group… there's no such thing as "death."

Continuing to live… forever.

"It might be easier to understand if we used plants as an example. Rather than counting them one by one, it's more accurate to count them by colony. In other words, in regards to Kuchiha, it would be

more accurate to count her as something *other than human*."

"Not a person… is that it?"

"Yes. Not a person, not an animal, not an organism, so that's why she can't die. If there was a time where she were to die, it would only be at the moment of *extinction*."

Extinction.

Extinction… has occurred.

Because Kuchiha-chan is dead.

"Even if you say grand things like it's a *deathless body*, it's not like it really can't die… If you destroy its stomach, then it'll die normally. The point is that she was of a different species from humanity." The fox-masked man said in a disillusioned way. "The paradox between growth and evolution, was it? Maybe she was an extraterrestrial life form."

"Is that possible?"

"I won't say that it's impossible. However, my interpretation is a bit more fantastical… **I think she might have been someone from outside of the Story**. She might have been a character that wasn't supposed to appear. That would mean that a character that wasn't meant to be part of the story had managed to slip in. Hmm. It's a bit like having a character from a science fiction novel in a mystery novel… If I put it like that, it might be easier to understand. In short, that's what I mean. Kuchiha was an unavoidable *bug* who got itself into the program known as the Story, she was a *typo* who infiltrated the novel."

"....."

"Her name… it's probably not inscribed in what I would call the Akashic Records. It's as if she wasn't there from the start. The outside dug into the inside. She wasn't anything special, just lacking."

A contradiction… a misprint.

A failure of God.

She will not die because she wasn't given *death*.

It's not that she won't die.

Death was missing.

That's… that would be like Kuchiha-chan was really dead while

still living, wouldn't it? Her words, which were strangely throwaway and self-deprecating, pierced me like a spear, one by one. The words that she said earlier felt *alien*, but had a strange persuasive power.

I see… the worlds we live in are different.

It's not about species or kinds.

It's not the back, the front, the reverse, or the opposite.

It's about a resident from a different world.

Then… there's no way we can analyse it.

Her existence is similar to that fortune teller.

The only choice is to give up on trying to understand.

But there are things to be gained by abandoning understanding. That fortune teller said it… there are sometimes people whose hearts can't be read, whose future can't be read. Kunagisa Tomo was like that for that fortune teller. I thought that it was because her heart was too deep, but in reality that wasn't it, it was because her name wasn't clearly written in the story……

"Well, since it's statistically impossible for a work of art to be free of all bugs and mistakes… Kuchiha's existence was something inevitable and indispensable to the Story. Maybe there are more people like Kuchiha out there… Being immortal might not have been a bug or an error, but anyway, *that unnecessary existence had to exist as something necessary and indispensable*. It's a paradox that will forever remain unsolved… Obviously, this is just a conceptual discussion, and I have no interest in solving that *deathless body* with reason. It's something that's out of bounds even for me. Maybe she had eaten the flesh of a mermaid…."

Yao Bikuni.

800 years.

"Even you have read Takahashi Rumiko, right?"

"……."

Apparently he likes Shogakukan.

"You seem to have a talent for leaving things you don't understand as they are"

"Well, yeah. That's important, you know. Even if I could figure out the method to *not die*, the next stage that I chose after not being able

to replicate it was to use a different method to reach the same goal. To *not die* is to give up. Because even without a *deathless body*, there is a way for me to know everything that I want to know. It's extremely clear and simple--

I just need to read the story.

With Kuchiha's existence, I was convinced that the story exists. **As long as there is a misprint, there is a Story**. That's obvious. That's exceptionally obvious. It's so evident that putting it into words would be a waste of time.

"Reading the Story, is that it?"

That's… an observer.

In the ultimate sense, that's an observer.

"Once you're convinced of the Story's existence, it's natural human emotion to want to read it. It's not a unique feeling. Because achieving that would become one's deepest wish. The key is to separate this way from that way. The strong and the weak, the not so strong and the not so weak, and the good and the good enough will build a monument similar to the Tower of Babel. I'm fine as long as I can observe that pyramid from the sidelines… Something like that"

Kukkukku, the fox-masked man laughed in between.

"Having said that, up to now, I've been repeating that trial and error approach in a variety of unsightly ways… *Zerozaki Hitoshiki* was supposed to be the fourth approach, so that makes it the fourth defeat. For the current me who is lacking Rizumu, searching for his whereabouts would be too difficult. I have no choice but to move on to the next step."

"....For 'the current me?'"

"I thought I told you. I've been expelled from causality, so I can't act openly. Now that Izumu and Rizumu are gone, I'll have to search for new Stairs… There are very few *Stairs* in the first place, so losing two here is a bothersome and strange story… Hmm. Well, this concludes the conversation about Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Have you been satisfied?"

"Yes… that was very helpful."

To be honest, I still didn't understand.

But… there's one thing I do understand.

This man and Zerozaki must not be allowed to cross paths.

I'm certain that it would result in something outrageous.

It's a bit hard to imagine that that human failure had a meaning this active, that a serial killer whose only raison d'etre was to kill had such an ultimate meaning… but still.

I must not let this man meet him.

That much is certain.

…..Thinking about it normally, it's not like I have to be so tremendously worried. People don't meet so easily. In books and movies, if you happen to be walking around aimlessly, you'll end up meeting someone you know or are thinking about **by chance**, but the only time such a phenomenon is accepted as reality is in high school dramas where the range of action is overwhelmingly limited. Once you take a step out into the city, you can't do it anymore. Encountering someone **by chance** on a train, or witnessing **by chance** two people together, those kinds of things are just a fantasy. Chance encounters don't happen that often, and fated encounters are absolutely impossible.

Furthermore, Zerozaki Hitoshiki is dead.

That was the result of Rizumu-chan's investigation.

There's no such thing as meeting or parting with a dead person.

However.

I met Rizumu-chan.

I met Izumu-kun.

I met the fox-masked man.

Chance.

Just by chance.

With probabilities that can only be described as inevitable.

Like a story.

"It seems that Kigamine was doing her best to break down fate on

her own, that's why she contacted you… but that too was unnecessary. Trying to carve out your own destiny isn't a mistake or a typo, it's just the usual presumptuousness that humans like so much. She wasn't breaking open her destiny at all. From the start, Kigamine had been searching for **someone like you**… Even before you were offered that part-time job, even before you had been contacted by Kigamine… um, what was it again…? Right, you had already heard about her from Aoii Mikoko. You had already known about Kigamine Yaku. Hmm. At the very least to the extent that you had remembered it, you held an interest in Kigamine. Kigamine forcibly twisted her schedule to set the stage, and whether she contacted you or not… whether you took the job or not, sooner or later, **no matter what you did**, you would have met… and you would have met Kuchiha. Sooner or later, that's the only difference."

I met Assistant Professor Kigamine.

I met Kuchiha-chan.

I met Hime-chan in June.

I met Kasugai-san in July.

I met Aikawa-san in April.

I met Zerozaki in May.

What about Kunagisa? And what about Magokoro?

That… can I say that it was just a coincidence?

That would be… way more unlikely.

"'A rebellion against causality. A revolution against the existent destiny. A declaration of independence confronting the inevitability of what's to come...' I have already passed my immature and romantic period where I could say things like that. Those observing causality, those gazing at destiny, those enjoying the inevitable should leave battle to the slaves. I am a man who has changed my positions and opinions many times, but this is the one thing that won't ever change. I will tell you the purpose that I've held since the moment I've been born...

To make this uninteresting world interesting---

until it's exhausted."

"Interesting, huh?"

"Yes. In that sense, Kigamine's aesthetic sense in regards to choosing you is considerable… You, you're truly interesting. The more I hear about you, the more interesting your existence becomes. It's not like you haven't thought about it, right? The reason why when there were five people and four died, **the only one to survive was you**. Why is that? Is it because you're the killer?"

"Eh, that's----"

"That's wrong! You, you have too much potential to die in a place like that… isn't that right?"

"……..You're overestimating me," I answered like always. "As you can see, I'm just a kid."

"Hmm. That part is different from the **old** me… Certainly, it's as Kigamine and Kuchiha said. **You resemble the old me**… not in terms of personality or appearance… but **the soul.**"

"The soul……"

"Yes. The soul of Humanity's Worst."

…….

I couldn't argue against that. I couldn't object.

Far from it, I was about to accept it.

"Ah, so that was it." Like that.

Just barely, I managed to regroup.

"Give me a break… Someone like me is just the weakest. Humanity's Weakest, the Nonsense User"

"Strong is weak and weak is strong, you know. That probably means that your weakness has already turned into strength. Since I said it, there's no mistake. Well, your story is still full of many causes and effects… I still can't predict what will happen from now on. The only advice I can give you would be that you should live every day with fun and enjoyment."

"……..That's what I'm the worst at."

"Naturally. It's difficult because it's simple. It's difficult, and

therefore it's interesting. What's the fun in participating in a game where you won't feel bad if you fail? There's no meaning in just participating. Winning and gaining joy, failing and gaining humiliation, that's where there is meaning."

Victory and loss, they're just the stepping stones to the *sequel*.

The fox-masked man stood up suddenly.

He seemed to be going home this time.

"…….Ah"

I wondered if it was fine like this.

I was suddenly impatient.

Is it fine to let the fox-masked man go home right now?

In the end, it feels like we only talked about *other* things and I've heard nothing about the case. Don't I still have questions to ask? If he has realized the truth of the matter, then if I asked him to tell me… No, there's no meaning to it if I don't figure it out myself. It'd be no good if he just told me.

But even so, if I don't manage to at least catch something like a hint, then won't I just stray further from the truth…..

Something.

Any hint.

"……You look like you want something."

The fox-masked man said.

"No matter how you ask, I can't answer something that I can't answer, but otherwise... I'll answer one more question for you."

"Only one…?"

I was lost. What could I ask? What should I ask? Destiny. Inevitability. Causality. Fate. Kigamine Yaku. Researching not dying. Madoka Kuchiha. A deathless body. Yukariki Ichihime. *Zig Zag*'s disciple. Kasugai Kasuga. Freeloader. The Saitou Clinic. The fox-masked man. The Nonsense User. Shit. Shit. Shit. No matter how much I think and think and think and think, the answer won't come. The best question in this situation, I can't come up with a question like the ones the fox-masked man asked earlier. All I could come up with was vague and unimportant questions.

To be honest, it's not like I don't have a hypothesis.

It's not like I can't explain what happened.

Kunagisa had also said she had a hypothesis. At the very least, from the fox-masked man's reaction, I know that there is a **clear answer**. However… no matter what I do, with just that, it's weak.

It's weak.

In order to break through that weakness, no matter what, there's one prerequisite that I must tear down. But that prerequisite is too strong and tough. It's a castle with an almost absolute, iron wall. It was a hypothesis that felt like it was the kind of escapism that felt equal to falsifying history.

Ah… fuck, I want a smarter brain. I won't ask for something like Aikawa-san or Kunagisa. I don't need that much. What I need is to achieve the greatest result with the least ability, the mind of a *strategist*….

".....Hagihara Shiogi."

I said.

"Hagihara Shiogi… are you familiar with her?"

"Hagihara……."

"Since you know Shisei Yuma and Yukariki Ichihime… maybe you also know that name… that's what I thought."

"More than just knowing her....."

The fox-masked man sounded as if he was taken aback by my carefreeness.

"That girl is none other than the one who turned the Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe against the Serial Killer Group, the Zerozaki clan. She's that crazy kid. You also knew someone like that?"

"Yes… well, she's an acquaintance."

"One theory is that at that time, two people were participating on the Zerozaki side: *Mind Render* and *Seamless Bias*… Being stuck in between a pincer attack by those big scissors and that nail bat must have been a hell that I can't even imagine. Even with just half of the rumors I heard from Izumu, the *Strategist*, Hagihara Shiogi… she surpasses my imagination. She's the ultimate monster."

"....."

Shiogi-chan was someone that amazing?

I said some impertinent things.

But….

But if she wasn't at that level, I'd be in trouble.

"So, what about that Hagihara Shiogi?"

"Yes… Um, I heard a story that Shiogi-chan went up against the Niounomiya… At that time, Izumu-kun and Rizumu-chan, did the *Cannibal* Niounomiya siblings clash with Shiogi-chan?"

"They didn't."

It was an immediate answer.

"If the rumors are true, then Izumu's combat skills can't compare against Hagihara Shiogi. He would be led around by the nose and that would be his downfall… Even Rizumu's incredible *weakness* probably won't do anything against the *Strategist*. I'll say this just in case, but that doesn't mean that the Niounomiya siblings are useless. Hagihara Shiogi can even toy with *Fragment* at her will. Hey… you, if you're acquainted with Hagihara Shiogi, then won't you introduce me to her? Perhaps Hagihara Shiogi could be my *that*. The demon child of the Four Gods and One Mirror. Hagihara Shiogi, the *Strategist*. If I were to try to guess a little, her computational ability is probably five times higher than mine… I thought a fate where I could meet a monster like that was impossible, but if she's someone you know, things might not be that desperate. Even if I'm wrong, I'd be willing to give you one of the two seats in the *Thirteen Stairs* left open without Izumu and Rizumu. The Four Gods and One Mirror can't handle someone like that, the computational ability of Hagihara Shiogi is a blade that can only cut under me."

The fox-masked man continued in a feverish tone.

"What do you say, Onii-san? Do me a favor and introduce me to her. Then I'll answer your earlier unanswered questions. I'll tell you the cheap truth behind this case."

"No… It's a very tempting offer, but since the organization Shiogi-chan was affiliated with got destroyed, I got cut off from her. I can't get in touch with her."

"Is that so… that's a shame." The fox-masked man was clearly

disappointed. Depending on the angle, he appeared to be more disappointed than when he heard of Zerozaki Hitoshiki's death from Rizumu-chan. It was a bit surprising that this man had such emotions. "It can't be helped… Back Nozzle can also work against you. Things that won't happen will definitely not happen, and even if they do, they have no meaning. Well… still, I'll continue to think that if we have a connection, we'll meet each other eventually. If she's as much a monster as the rumors say, as long as she's not attacked by her relatives, she probably won't die… By the way, what does that give you? I couldn't get the point of that question, but it won't give you anything. I still have a bit more time, so I could give you another chance."

"**No… it's fine like this.**"

I answered.

Alright… I got it.

I finally got there.

I had a leap of imagination.

The magic was dispelled.

The formula was completed.

If they didn't fight against Shiogi-chan… if the Niounomiya siblings haven't directly interacted with Shiogi-chan, then I already have an answer.

Now that I think about it, **that** was the only constraint.

If that's the case, then the prerequisite will collapse.

It's simple.

It's clear.

The answer… was just that.

"Thank you, Mr. Fox."

"Yeah… I don't really get it, but, well, if it's okay with you, that's fine. It doesn't sound like you're bluffing either. Then, If we have a connection---"

And.

The fox-masked man was about to say his signature phrase when I

heard something like a warning sound coming from my pants pocket. It was the ringtone that Kasugai-san had set without my permission. The one singing this heavy metal ringtone from hell was…..

I don't even want to think about it.

Really… what a person.

".....Is it fine if I leave?'

"Ah, no. Please excuse me."

"Yeah. Then I'll go now. Ciao"

As soon as the fox-masked man turned his back on me, I pulled out my cell phone out of my pocket. The number on the LCD screen was a familiar one.

Really……

It should have taken three days.

"Hey!"

Suddenly, I was yelled at.

"You, what are you hiding from me, you moron!"

"....."

I moved the phone slightly away from my face.

My head shook.

"Hello, Jun-san..."

As one would expect.

As one would expect, even I couldn't call her by her last name in this situation.

"It's not hello! Why didn't you contact me when Ichihime died, you fool! Not only did you not contact me, but you're the one who covered it up! I don't know what happened, but did you really think I was going to blame you?! I'm not that lame of a person, you idiot! I was the one who entrusted you with Ichihime, you, what are you doing trying to steal that responsibility off of me!! *That* is mine, give it back!"

"....."

"If you mess up, I'll forgive you, so explain the situation! You're a pain in the ass, but I don't care! You should really start to trust me! Why does my greatness not come through to you, even you must see it, right!? I'm the best, or are you too stupid to understand that?! I'm

coming over now, so don’t move from there!"

"....."

Really…….

Really, this person feels good.

What a good person.

I want to thank you.

And tell you my gratitude.

That I was able to meet you.

That I was able to meet you in this Story.

…….But.

".....You don’t need to worry."

Let’s end it already.

The period where I’ve caused trouble for you will end here.

I really wanted to stay under your protection forever. Even now, I really think that from the bottom of my heart. I want to hide in your shadow for the rest of my life. I even thought about becoming someone who tells your stories. I want to be a bystander, telling your story from the outside. Because the fact that I know you is my pride and dignity.

But.

That’s no longer any good.

That’s… not forgivable anymore.

It’s not something that’ll be forgiven.

Because *that* is mine.

"You don’t need to worry"

"Huuuh?"

"I’ve… already solved most of it. All that’s left is to finish it… I’m truly sorry, **but this time I’m the one who’ll wrap things up.**" I said clearly with all of my determination. "At that time, I would by all means like to borrow Jun-san’s power… will you help me? I’m going to come up with a *plan*… could I insert you into it?"

"....."

Aikawa-san was silent for a short while.

"That's quite… optimistic. How?"

"It's… nothing much."

"Okay, that's fine. I'll hear it when we meet… So, where do you want me to go?"

"Will you accept?"

"That's a stupid question. What would happen if Humanity's Strongest Contractor refused a request… I don't know what it is, but it sounds interesting."

"Of course. After involving you in this matter, I wouldn't do something that would bore you, Jun-san."

"Hah. Then let's do it flashily… it's Himecchi's battle of revenge. Since the Niounomiya Troupe is involved, I won't have to hold back for once."

"Then… for now, let's meet up at the Kyoto Imperial Palace. I'll head there now. I'm a bit far away at the moment, so I'll be there in three hours."

"Roger."

"See you, Aikawa-san."

"You, don't call me by----"

I hung up halfway through.

It was a bit funny.

Well, the preparation is done.

Let's go do… what I want to do.

I don't really know what's going to happen since I've never done this before, but I can just leave the things I don't understand as they are.

In any case, the result will come out.

Whichever the result is.

Which result?

No, the result will always be one fixed thing.

When I got up from the cushion,

"....."

".....Huh?"

The fox-masked man was there, still with his back to me.

He was there.

"Didn't you go home?"

".....Aikawa……. Jun."

The fox-masked man mumbled.

And then he turned around with incredible speed.

It was so dreadful that I could feel the pressure from underneath the mask.

"Just now, you said Aikawa Jun, right?"

"Y-yes…."

I nodded without thinking.

The fox-masked man's body was trembling…. he was vibrating so much that you'd think he was having some kind of seizure. While convulsing, he was cowering. His reaction was even more intense than when he heard Shiogi-chan's name earlier.

"Aikawa Jun… Overkill Red… Death Colored Crimson… Hermit Killer… Desert Eagle..."

"Eh…….?" Death Colored Crimson? "Um, Mr. Fox---"

"……Kukkukku."

Then.

"……..Ahahahahahahaha!"

The fox-masked man laughed with all his strength.

"**So you were the right choice**! When we met last time, I thought that it was **possible**… but *it was further than possible*! There's nothing further than this! It's truly unparalleled! How is this possible?! Not on Zerozaki Hitoshiki's side, but on yours! This ordinary looking man that I *just happened to meet in the middle of nowhere*… Ahahahahahahahahaha! Kigamine, you really, really, really have a good eye! That's what I expect from the woman who, without bending, followed and followed and followed after me! Okay, in the end, I finally respect you! I will kneel before you!"

"Wait… um?"

"You! Ahaha, what the hell are you?! You yourself are nothing but an ordinary, unremarkable brat and yet what's with all that black chaos swirling around you?! It's a melting pot of heresy and the grotesque, you truly are hell! Ahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha!

Hahahahahahahahaha! Delightful, delightful! Interesting, interesting! It's been a long time since something this interesting has happened! Why is the world so interesting?! It's truly a mystery! How murderously crazy is this universe?!"

"----Hi."

I suppressed the scream that I almost let out unconsciously.

I instinctively retreated.

Ah… scary.

For the first time in my life, I felt fear.

All the fear that I had felt up to now was nothing compared to this. If you say that this is fear, then I've never known fear before. My heart was beating so fast it felt like it was about to burst.

Fear.

Fear fear fear fear fear.

fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear fear.

This is fear.

It's unthinkable nonsense.

This man is….

Scary.

A cold sweat seeped out of me. My heart cracked.

Until just now, until just a second ago, I can't believe I was having a conversation with this person. Just how thin the rope I was walking on… I don't want to think about it.

"He-he-help---"

"Wonderful! It's too wonderful! I see. I didn't get to meet Zerozaki Hitoshiki, so I was destined to meet you. What a splendid Jail Alternative. Normally, a double of Zerozaki, an alternative to the ultimate killer and the absolute killer shouldn't exist! Why, why! However, my hypothesis wasn't wrong!"

He firmly grabbed me by the shoulders without any restraint.

"Ahahahahaha!
Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha, kukkukku---

Nice to meet you, my enemy.

I was finally able to meet you, I look forward to seeing you in the future and having a long relationship! Ahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha

And then the fox-masked man pushed me away. I landed on my butt on the tatami. The fox-masked man finally stopped laughing and, "Kukkukku" he laughed again and turned his back to me.

"It’s time to leave this place. This lame clinic isn’t fit to be the stage for our meeting. It’s not even worthy of an introduction, it’s a foreshadowing, at best. Well, now I will be busy, I will be busy, it will be hard, it will be hard, it’s a furious dance, it’s a confused mess! It’s fun, it’s fun, it’s fun, it’s fun, run, dance with joy and joy and joy and joy! Go crazy, go crazy, break, break go ill, go ill, go ill, go ill! Sing, sublimate, cheer, collapse! It’s the end, it’s the beginning, it’s the stopping point, it’s the quickening! Now, I have to get ready. Only half of the *Thirteen Stairs* are present because I didn’t expect things to progress this quickly. First of all, you need to deal with this rubbish, you must close this story concerning the Niounomiya siblings. You can’t let this kind of unimportant thing cause you problems later on. **I don’t care whose power you borrow, just clean it up properly**. I don’t want my fun to be lessened by even a tiny bit. Did you hear? Put your heart into it. Now, you need to realize with all the conviction in your soul that you can do it. You have now… closed every other destiny."

"Closed….."

"All you have left is causality with me. No, it was like that from the beginning. It’s an unavoidable destiny, it’s the Story’s plot. Neither you nor I can go anywhere anymore. Now we won’t be allowed to take a single detour anywhere until the Dying Epilogue!"

"What does that mean?"

"It’s the same whether it has a meaning or not. So, since we have a *bond*, we’ll meet again whether you want to or not. In the meantime, don’t forget to train yourself. Realize that self-improvement is the only

duty you possess."

"....."

The fox-masked man stepped across the threshold and out into the hallway.

I….

"You… who are you?"

Almost impulsively. Even though I didn't want to get involved any more, I asked. I couldn't help but ask. I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"You… what are you to Aikawa-san?"

"Hmm… me?"

The fox-masked man turned only his head.

He took off his mask and showed his true face.

His true face which looked a lot like her's.

His smile which looked a lot like her's.

"I'm me. The time to name myself hasn't come yet. My introduction will be on another day. If you want to call me by some sort of identifier… let's see. Humanity's Worst Player or something like that"

Then the fox-asked man continued.

"Aikawa Jun is my daughter."

CHAPTER 10 — DESTROYING WORST (DEVOURING GUILT)

0

Goodbye.
There won't be another chance.

1

Death.

Let's think about death.

In this world, that's something that holds a big meaning, something that doesn't *die* doesn't exist. All molecular structures, both living and nonliving, eventually arrive to their *death* in regret. No one, nothing, can escape from that law. To the point that you start to think that everything exists for the sole purpose of *dying*. Everything without exception arrives at death. If we could somehow stop our train of thought there, that would mean that *death* and *nothing* are not equal. At the least by thinking that way, humanity has been able to face the concept of death.

The most extreme example of that is religion.

We gave meaning to *death*.

We gave a sequel to *death*.

We gave a resurrection after *death*.

Both medicine and philosophy are the same as religion in trying to overcome death. Yes, everyone is afraid to die. A human being who doesn't mind dying can only be thought of as not having a correct understanding of *death*, being falsely convinced that they will be the only one to not die.

Or, perhaps they are truly someone who won't die.

However, people have to die.

That's the rule.

Not dying would be against the rules.

Against the rules of the game that is this world.

But how would that feel?

To be continuing forever.

After all, if you don't end somewhere, then you won't be able to endure it, right? If you don't set an end somewhere, people will get tired, won't they? The reason that people can run as fast as they can is because they only have to go for a hundred meters. Without setting an objective or a destination, there's no way one could run at full speed. It's said that if there is a beginning, there will be an end, but it's precisely because there is an end that people can decide to begin something, isn't it?

Really.

Does everyone really think that they don't want to die?

Is life that much fun?

I wasn't like that. It's not that I thought that it'd be fine to die whenever, back then, I never used to make the distinction between being alive and dead. That's right, the me back before I had yet met Overkill Red, the Orange Seed, that blue boy, or even my little sister, at that time, I didn't know about life or death.

I didn't know.

I was strong back then, when I didn't know

The me who didn't know of the end was strong.

Because I was strong… I was weak.

A body that won't die.

What would happen if you were given something like that?

If there was no end.

What would humans become if they were given eternity? Pain would become dull, wars would stop, and I'm sure various other things would be abandoned. The feelings that were important when there was an end would be easily thrown away….

And people would spend their time as if they were dead.

In the truest sense of the word, it's nonsense.

Yes, that's right.

When I had no problem dying, when life didn't mean anything to me, I spent my time like that. The me who didn't know about life or death. If something is fine with dying, then it doesn't exist to begin with. There was no need to make the distinction between life and death.

I wasn't a resident of a world where life and death existed.

That's why….

It was the same no matter what I did.

I was the weakest, so I was the strongest.

I was the strongest, so I was the weakest.

And I can say one more thing.

I was… the worst.

This still hasn't changed.

Dead as if I was alive.

Living as if I was dead.

Trying to forget I was living.

Wanting to forget I was living.

Yes, that's how it is.

Because that's how it is, don't break the rules.

Recognize death. Acquire death. Catch death.

Face death. Win against death. Battle with death.

Are you afraid to die?

Even then, face it.

Devour death.

This is that kind of story.

If you're prepared to die, you won't die while you're living.

"…….It's about time "

I checked the time on my phone one last time.

The date that was displayed….

August 19th, Friday.

5 minutes until 11 p.m.

The old clock on the wall also displayed the same time.

I turned off my phone and put it on top of the table. I was told to contact Aikawa-san any time, but even without being told that, I knew it was the right way to do things, but even then… I don't want any unnecessary obstacles to get involved. I don't want any unnecessary variables to get mixed in. If that happens, the stage that I set will be ruined.

"....."

I was in the same place as yesterday, in Assistant Professor Kigamine's laboratory, formerly the Saitou Clinic, sitting alone on a cushion in the waiting room without the lights on.

I didn't come back to the apartment.

After that yesterday, I made my way to the Kyoto Imperial Palace and had an all night discussion with Aikawa-san about Hime-chan and our future plans. And then I immediately came back here.

If I came back to the apartment, my resolve would've dulled.

That's right, I'm weak.

My resolve would lessen with such a small thing.

Even if there is a solution on one side and an explanation can be seen on the other side, I only have the uneasy, brittle, and flimsy intention to return to my original position.

Good grief. In the truest sense of the word, I'm pathetic.

There's a limit to how spineless one can be.

Is this really something that you can accomplish?

The voice of doubt sprang up from the inside.

Do you really understand what you're about to do? If you really understood, you wouldn't be acting so carefreely. Am I wrong? You're just trying to act cool, aren't you?

Always vague.

With an indecisive attitude.

It's unclear whether I'm even alive or dead.

Can you fight with that?

"....."

…..It's laughable.

I'm not going to fight.

I'm not going to win or lose.

Winning and losing are just the stepping stones towards the future.

Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose, that's natural. There's no such thing as a life with only victories, and neither is there a life with only losses. The ones who keep winning just don't notice those who keep losing, and the ones who keep losing just don't notice those who keep winning. Those who are strong just don't know they are weak, and those who are strong just don't know they are strong.

I'm weak, overwhelmingly weak.

But once you're aware of that weakness….

"Well, it won't go like a game of shogi."

That reminds me, someone once told me that there's no existence more unfortunate in modern society than a shogi or a go player. They can only use their unique and fearsome brains on the board. In a different world, the abilities of those *strategists* could easily shake the whole world.

However.

That's the same for everyone.

Even for Assistant Professor Kigamine who was only continuing.

Even for Kuchiha-chan who couldn't die.

Even for Hime-chan, and Rizumu-chan, and Izumu-kun.

Speaking of bad luck, that was bad luck.

Speaking of misfortune, that was unfortunate.

At least to the same extent as me.

"But they would probably never want… to receive pity from someone like me."

They're not dead.

They were alive.

Make this uninteresting world interesting…..

"Ding-dong."

The sound of the intercom.

I tried to check the time on my phone, but then remembered I had

turned it off. So I looked at the old clock on the wall instead. Exactly 11 p.m.

"....."

Hmm.

Surprisingly, they seemed to be precisely on time.

There was no sound of a door opening.

No sound of someone taking their shoes off and walking into the hallway.

That level of sound was completely erased.

Not long after, the sliding door opened suddenly.

".....Yo."

I was the one to speak first.

I didn't intend for it to be a preemptive strike.

First of all, that kind of thing wouldn't work.

"......Huh?"

He who had opened the sliding door….

Niounomiya Izumu tilted his head as if confused.

"Why are you here?"

2

Izumu-kun wasn't in his usual straitjacket.

He was wearing thin leather pants and a small leather jacket. He wasn't wearing anything underneath the jacket, so you could clearly see his pale body that was so thin you could make out the shape of his bones, and his small breasts were peeking out. He was barefoot, without any socks. Izumu-kun's long arms which didn't match with his small stature were no longer hidden in a straightjacket, so you could clearly see them.

Those arms.

Those hands.

Those fingers….

"Huh? That's weird… I was called by the *Death Colored Crimson*… that I should come here," Izumu-kun said, looking out of place and deeply confused from the bottom of his heart. "It seems that Yukariki Ichihime was *Death Color*'s kin, so to get revenge----"

"Aikawa-san is my girlfriend. We're in love."

I straightened my back and faced Izumu-kun.

"You're quite something too. You've got a lot of nerve, don't you? Did you really think you were going to fight directly to death with my girlfriend? Even in games and novels, before the final boss, there's always a middle boss."

"....."

Izumu-kun looked at me with piercing eyes.

It seemed like he had trouble responding.

".....And you're the middle boss?"

"That's right."

"Gyahahaha!" Izumu laughed loudly. "It's the first time I've seen a middle boss this weak! Even the Koopalings are a bit stronger!"

".....I have no words to deny that."

".....Hahahaha. Ah… I see. You too. You're angry that I killed that girl, Yukariki. Yeah, sorry, I really do feel bad that I had to break

our promise."

Breaking the promise.

It was as if he was only apologizing for that.

About having killed Hime-chan….

It was as if he didn't even think anything about it.

"Honestly, I'm relieved." I strung my words together while half ignoring Izumu-kun, who was still laughing. "Well, I thought that it was near impossible, but I considered that maybe it would be Rizumu-chan who would come here. The possibility of that wasn't zero."

"Well, that's right… Ah, that means," Izumu-kun said. "It's not just *Death Color,* you're also aware of our sibling's **trick**."

"Yeah," I nodded. "Or rather, the one who realized it and relayed it to Aikawa-san was me. However, if Aikawa-san had been involved in this case from the beginning, I'm sure she could have closed it without anyone dying."

"I'll tell you just in case."

Izumu-kun said boldly, without any hint of remorse.

"Hating me is absurd, you know? You're barking up the wrong tree, *Death Color* obviously, but you too. It was on Mr. Fox's orders that I massacred Kigamine and Madoka. What's wrong with a professional killer killing? When you kill someone with a gun, do you think that it's the gun's fault? You don't, right?"

"…….But Hime-chan was..."

"Aaah, that kid. It's true she wasn't my prey as a *professional killer*. However," Izumu-kun said. "Even so, when an organism is **about to get killed**, it has to protect itself."

"……."

"……If I remember correctly, *self defence* was allowed in our contract, right?"

"……Right."

As expected, it was like that.

So it was like that.

That was what we finally agreed on in yesterday's discussion with Aikawa-san. There were other possibilities, so we couldn't be sure, but if that was the case, it means the one who destroyed the tires of the

Fiat, the Katana, and the Z was Hime-chan.

Hime-chan, you idiot.

But in this case, Hime-chan wasn't the only idiot. Aikawa-san shouldn't have chosen Hime-chan as my bodyguard, and I shouldn't have agreed to it. Regardless of whether the tires were punctured, at that time, I should have gone over the mountain and returned to the apartment.

Hime-chan was a former soldier. It wasn't in her nature to leave an enemy in front of her, that's how she was raised. Both Aikawa-san and I should have understood that very well. We should have understood that. That there was no way Hime-chan would leave the *Cannibal*, the *Niounomiya* right in front of her alone. That was something we should have understood already.

Hime-chan's sense of duty was too strong.

Her habits didn't leave.

Her former bad habits.

Her fighting instinct.

"But I wonder how Hime-chan noticed that you were a *Niounomiya*. You had adopted a false name, and Rizumu-chan was properly performing in front of Hime-chan.

"The smell, I guess," Izumu-kun said. "Don't you know? Murderers have the smell of blood and decayed flesh ingrained in them. I had noticed that Yukariki Ichihime was a *murderer*, right? So why do you think that the opposite is impossible?"

"I see. I understand."

"**Or that's what I would have wanted to say**."

However, Izumu-kun continued further.

"**Don't forget that I have Rizumu-chan to make that impossible**. As long as Rizumu was there, there's no way that we siblings would have been exposed as a *professional killer*."

"....."

"In other words, you and I were too careless. It's not Rizumu's fault, nor is it Kigamine's fault. You and I were too careless and spoke too much. At that time, I shouldn't have come out to the courtyard, and you shouldn't have told anything to Yukariki Ichihime."

Me?

No, I kept it a secret from Hime-chan. I'm sure that I never told Hime-chan that I knew Rizumu-chan and Izumu-kun from before.

…….However.

It's not like she couldn't have seen through it with my *unnatural behavior*. Maybe just me asking Hime-chan about the *Nionomiya* was enough in the first place.

"Then, as I thought, it's my fault?"

"Who knows. Anyway, we were probably already past the point where we could trick her. It wasn't a truth that could be covered up by a lie. No, no, Yukariki Ichihime was surprisingly not that stupid. She must have had a certain amount of insight."

"……"

Yes, I had forgotten that too.

Hime-chan might have been an idiot, but she possessed an outstanding combat sense. Furthermore, Hime-chan was very good at lying. It wasn't just something she was good at, it was a way of life for her, just like my nonsense. I should have known that quite well back in June. She could create a fiction that would make you not notice what you'd normally notice as easily as she breathed.…..

"But she was a strong opponent. I wasn't able to get away unscathed. I had no experience in dealing with a *string technique* user, and that kid's abilities as a soldier were through the roof. She was nearly at the highest level, comparable to a pro player. Who the hell was she? Maybe she was someone famous enough that Mr. Fox would know her. I didn't expect to see a string technique user in my line. I was surprised."

"Can you tell me the details?"

"Details? Ah, I see. Unfortunately, there aren't any to speak of. She simply forced that fight in the courtyard when she found herself alone with Rizumu in the middle of the night. We didn't have any reason to flee or refuse when challenged."

"……"

"She touched on the **keyword**, so I came out and we had a fight."

"……I see."

Then that was right after Kuchiha-chan had called me to take a shower. If I assume that, it would match up with the time when I passed her on the stairs. When I returned to our room after exchanging words with Kigamine, she was already no longer in bed.

Hime-chan.

At that time… what was she thinking? Did she think she would come back? Or maybe… No, there's no point in thinking about that kind of thing. If that were true, there'd be nothing to be saved.

"Our world is flexible due to violence. Pacifism is ultimately based on violence. If she had won, we would have erased ourselves from your sight. That was the condition. I told her, you know? That I wouldn't lay my hands on you, but she wouldn't even listen."

"Well, she was a stubborn girl."

"That's right. She's not the type who listens to her enemies, so she won't live a long life. Oh right, I killed her, didn't I? Gyahaha!"

"....."

"Laugh." Izumu-kun clicked his tongue, not even trying to hide his irritation. "In short, Yukariki had killed too many people to live. Once you become like that, it's already too late. Having killed that many people and then trying to live, and as a normal high school girl at that, it's too shameless. Even you understand that, don't you? Yukariki Ichihime had killed too many people to continue living. Yukariki Ichihime was too strong… she was too weak."

She had killed too many people to continue living.

Maybe that's true.

Hime-chan had been taught that for a long time.

Kill the enemy.

Hunt whoever gets in your way.

Never let risk factors escape.

Don't hesitate, cut off their heads and then think about it.

Don't miss the opportunity. Don't trust, it'll get you killed.

That's what she had been taught all along.

To the point where it was ingrained.

To the point where it couldn't be removed.

To the point where she wouldn't be able to count her own death

as death.

To the point that if there was an enemy nearby, she couldn't hesitate.

Then, was it already too late for Hime-chan?

Was everything too late for Hime-chan?

Happiness and fun….

Was everything too late?

"....."

That's… not true.

That wasn't the case.

I can affirm that.

I don't care what anyone says, I can affirm it.

"……After having killed Hime-chan, what did you do?"

"To be honest, I had no intention of killing her when we first started to fight. I also had that promise with you," Izumu-kun confessed reluctantly. "But I had no other choice than to kill her. I had no other choice than to kill her. I thought that she would calm down after having both of her arms **devoured**, but that wasn't the case at all. That kid was no joke. It was impossible."

"....."

Right.

Even for Shiogi-chan, handling Hime-chan and Tamamo-chan was difficult. She wasn't half-hearted, she wasn't half-baked. She wasn't the kind of opponent you could fight while holding back. She was too strong. Even the *Cannibal* couldn't hold back.

"There was nothing I could do, so I advanced my *plans*. Having killed one person, I had no other choice but to change my schedule… even if that meant breaking my promise with you. In the first place, there was no longer any promise or anything since I had killed Yukariki at that point. It was mostly null and void. The promise was already broken."

"……Well, that's right."

"Well, Rizumu's *investigation* only lasted a day, so she hadn't reached a conclusion, but to some extent, she already had an inference for those two. Even though she's my own sister, that's quite some

work for one day. However, there was no denying the lack of information, so I decided to be honest."

"Honest?"

"I asked those two. Kigamine was up working and I woke Madoka from her sleep. 'I was sent here by Mr. Fox, probably that Saitou you called your mentor, he told me to kill you guys, what will you do?'"

Izumu-kun showed me his long arms.

As if tempting me.

As if seducing me.

As if inviting me.

"The two nodded their heads and said, 'Then please do so.' Against that, I was at a loss."

"**Please do so**… was it?"

I couldn't hide my surprise.

My voice trembled.

That was… unexpected.

Even Aikawa-san didn't say that.

"In regards to Madoka, she said something about not wanting to dirty the bed, so she chose the shower room as her place of death. In reality, I think those two were probably tired."

The assistant professor who continued to follow the fox-masked man.

The girl who had died without being able to die.

They got tired.

Tired, as if rotting.

That's why… they accepted death?

That kind of fantasy is absurd. They just gave up when the professional killer appeared in front of them. They simply despaired at the sight of the professional killer sent by their former mentor. That's all it was. Who could die for a reason such as being tired? If you do that kind of thing….

If you do something so brazen as if you were an insect….

Death would lose meaning.

Once you accept death, it ceases to exist.

If you're not alive, you won't die.

Because you won't die, you're not alive.

Then, in the truest sense….

It's a body that won't die.

"……..I'm tired too."

Izumu-kun said.

He sounded really tired.

"I'm tired too. Tired of killing people. Tired of doing my job. After killing those two, after talking to them, that's what I thought. No. I've been tired since a long time ago."

"……That's," I said. "**That's why you tried to erase your existence after that**."

"Some time ago, Mr. Fox described me as a workaholic, a murder lover, a murder addict, and I can only say that that's entirely correct. But what comes after addiction is just boredom."

"……Boredom?"

"Yeah. Not overwhelming, not ultimate, not absolute, not fatal, just boredom. Did you know? Some mammals have a system built into their genes that allows them to die naturally when they get tired of being alive. I once heard that from Mr. Fox. Don't you think that's the best program? …Those two also, weren't they just tired of living?"

"That's…."

I understand that for Kuchiha-chan.

She had lived too long.

But what about Assistant Professor Kigamine?

She hadn't lived long enough to get tired.

She probably wasn't living.

She wasn't supposed to be alive.

"**The reason why you were so tired, wasn't it rather because you had fought with Hime-chan**?"

"……..Maybe. It's possible."

Izumu-kun nodded for the time being.

He didn't deny it.

Honestly, I didn't understand. But still, Hime-chan, Kuchiha-chan, and Assistant Professor Kigamine, killing those three was probably more of an opportunity than a cause for Izumu-kun. It was the trigger, not the bullet itself.

A caged bird.

Izumu-kun was, of continuing to be a *Niounomiya*….

Of continuing to be kept by the fox-masked man….

Of continuing to be Rizumu-chan's back….

Of continuing to be Rizumu-chan's front….

Bored.

"Gyahahahaha!" Izumu-kun suddenly laughed loudly. "Well, that's why! I was thinking of using it as a chance to retire, but then I received a call from *Death Color*. What the hell is that? What, what! Was this all something you set up?"

"Well, yes."

I stood up.

"Because no matter what, I wanted to see you."

I wanted to meet.

I wanted to meet and talk.

I had already deduced from the fox-masked man's words that Izumu-kun was about to enter into a life of seclusion. A caged bird. That in itself was fine. That's Izumu-kun's freedom. The problem is my freedom. How to catch Izumu-kun's tail.

At any rate, no matter how I thought about it, it was impossible for me. Even if I asked Kunagisa, Izumu-kun was a resident of a world outside of the Kunagisa Syndicate's reach. Setting aside the fact that we couldn't investigate, it would also mean having to cross a somewhat dangerous bridge. There's no way I could make Kunagisa do that kind of thing. That's why I asked the one who's a resident of every world, Humanity's Strongest Contractor, Overkill Red, Aikawa Jun, to appear on the scene.

"But if you want to summon Izumu who's going into seclusion,

you'll need some decisive bait, and this guy isn't half-assed about that kind of thing. If we contact him poorly, he'll just escape. Do you have such convenient bait?"

To Aikawa-san's question, I answered, "You don't need to worry about it." Right, I had heard before what Izumu-kun wished for. The *thing* Izumu-kun desires, I heard it. At that point, I still didn't know that the *Death Colored Crimson* was Aikawa-san, but….

That itself was convenient.

More than convenient, it was a good connection.

"…….Hmmm." Izumu-kun narrowed his eyes. "It seems I'm a popular guy. But, unfortunately, I don't particularly want to see you. Gyahaha, I'm a pretty sinful man, aren't I? Haha. Well, speaking seriously, I don't want there to be any awkward feelings either. Even so, do you really care? About the promise I broke."

"Don't say such cold things. I'm persistent, you know? It'd be the worst thing in the world to have a stalker like me. Be careful about how you handle it."

"Gyahaha… I get that you're serious."

"And I set up a battle with the *Death Colored Crimson*, remember? That's your lifelong wish, isn't it?"

"It's more of a regret than a wish."

Izumu-kun spread out his arms like a peacock.

Long arms. Excessively long, slender arms.

It was an intimidating pose.

"I… I wanted something to measure exactly how far I've come. In that sense, you got a nice thing set up for me. Soooooo, how does this system work? After breaking through you, will the *Death Colored Crimson* appear?"

"Aikawa-san isn't here. I'm the only one who knows where she is. Aikawa-san will be waiting there for you until a certain time. If you can make me talk, you win. If you can't make me talk, you lose."

"My win and my loss, huh. Hmmmm. My win and my loss…." Izumu-kun repeated as if chewing on it. "Do you have a win condition?"

"The only one who can win is you. Either you win or you lose,

only one of those. I have no intention of doing any of that." I said clearly, without any embarrassment, even though I thought it was a ridiculous statement. "I just want to realize."

"Realize? What?"

"Who knows…."

I pulled out the blade-shaped knife from my holster. Since I had been sitting there for a long time, I had imagined it all the way through. I pointed the knife towards Izumu-kun in front of me, put my left foot on the table, and aimed at his thin neck….

"....Boring."

With a whirl, my vision rotated.

Without having the time to grasp what just happened, without having the time to realize that my foot on the table was **somehow** brushed away, I fell on the table on my left shoulder. I immediately protected my body with my right hand, but before I could take the next action, Izumu extended his foot towards me and his toes pierced into my ribs.

"Guh… Ah!?"

A weird pain I've never experienced before attacked my abdomen, making me roll and fall off the table. The cushion that I had been sitting on earlier absorbed the impact, but it didn't neutralize all of the shock.

With a crack, my ribs creaked.

By now, there was pain even in the ankle that had been brushed away.

"Guuuuuuh."

"It's not broken... I just **removed** a couple of ribs, but don't push yourself. Those dislocated ribs are no longer armor but a weapon to your internal organs."

"....."

"I couldn't restrain myself with the leg I hit, so I might have cracked it. If it's just that, you can bear it. You're a man, right?" Izumu-kun said while laughing slightly. "So, where's *Death Color*?

Where should I go to meet *Death Color*?"

".....Good grief." While enduring the pain still running through my abdomen, I lifted my upper body. I glared at Izumu-kun. "In your world, does *Cannibal* mean a pervert who strokes someone's belly with the end of his foot? I can't introduce such a low level pervert to Aikawa-san. To introduce you to Aikawa-san, you must be a little more deviant."

".....It seems you don't understand." Izumu-kun didn't respond to my cheap provocation. He talked like he was trying to persuade a child. "The gap between your combat power and mine, it's not a gap that can be filled with spirit, bravery, or even your skillful nonsense. At the very least, when it comes to fighting a head on battle. Looking at you, your body is somewhat trained, and I understand that your reflexes aren't that bad either, but I'm a professional player. Your movements look still to me. Whether it be an ambush or a trick, even If I respond after confirming your movement, I can still react in time."

"....."

"Torture is the Hakamori's territory, so it's not my speciality, but it's not like I don't know how to do it. Look, I won't say anything bad. I'll tell you before I cutely start doing cruel things to you."

"Cutely, huh……" I repeated Izumu-kun's words. "Then don't you think there's a better way than torture? If you try to seduce me, I might easily give it away. I can't stop thinking about your nipples that have been appearing and disappearing out of view. Ah, but… that's that. That, yeah, that. I mean, it's that, you know."

".....Huh?"

"It's no good if the person is younger than me… **somehow, it reminds me of my little sister, and that makes me lose interest.**"

".....I don't get you, dude." There was some irritation mixed in Izumu-kun's voice. Anger at me who he couldn't understand… that didn't seem to be it. "I don't get you, I really don't get you. I can only think that you're crazy. How's your brain doing? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yes yes yes yes! Then, the very gentle Professor Izumu will explain it to you in a way that even a pig could understand. I will show you a sight that's much easier to understand than words. A death sentence for

both of your eyes. These arms."

Izumu-kun showed me the back of his arms from the elbows. His fingers faced towards the back of his hands and took the form of a rake.

"Do you know? Or do you not know? These were how I got the name *Man Eater*. These arms themselves are my speciality. **Take a good look**…."

Suddenly, Izumu-kun rotated his arms, bending both of his rake-like hands backwards, and swung them down at the table!

"----**That's how it is***!"*

The sound of destruction.

Or rather, it was the sound of an explosion.

When I opened my eyes, I inadvertently closed them again because of the impact. Izumu-kun's arms had pierced into the tatami on the floor up to his wrists. The table had been completely gouged through, as if a grizzly had swung down on it, as it was eaten.

The wooden table was about five centimeters thick.

And then… with those thin, feminine arms.

"It's not The Hand. It's my, Niounomiya Izumu's, treasured sword, *Eating One*." Izumu-kun laughed ominously. "If you train the human body without thinking about the consequences, you can reach this level. I'm a living example of that. Obviously, it's not just this *Eating One*. Even with these legs, if I kicked normally, I could easily bend something like the human neck. The incredible amount of restraint I had to exercise on your ribs… you already understand it, don't you?"

"……*Eating One*."

Kuchiha-chan, who had her upper and lower half split apart.

Assistant Professor Kigamine, who had her left shoulder cut off.

Hime-chan, who had both of her arms cut off.

"I see… I was wondering about what kind of weapon you used to be able to do such a thing. So you just used a hidden technique."

I must be quite something to be able to sleep through all those explosive sounds. I had heard about *Eating One* from the fox-masked man, but I didn't think it would be a one-hit surekill technique. I see, it's as Kunagisa said… the ultimate personification of the grotesque.

Abnormal abilities that go one level beyond ultimate.

"Izumu-kun will show even more kindness and teach you a good thing, Onii-san. The weak point of this technique, or rather it's drawback, **is that I can't hold back at all.**" Izumu-kun showed me the palm of his hands that were still in the form of a rake and then showed the back of his hands. "That's why I had to wear that straitjacket so that I wouldn't go on a rampage. Gyahaha. In fact, as you can see, I can only produce that level of destructive power. That's the default, I can't set it to different levels. That level of power that can even destroy an iron plate is the norm. However, that's not a weak point, but a flaw. Come on, man, think about it. If you ate this thing, or **if you were eaten by this thing**, it would be a tragedy. You can't defend against *Eating One*, defending has no meaning. If you took it with your arms or your legs, they would just get blown away. In fact, even more than the damage, the wounds it leaves are terrible. Even though it's my own treasured sword, it's unpleasant, like an explosion. You can't even stitch together the torn wounds. It's an irreparable, absolute injury."

Izumu-kun picked up a shard of the table that was scattered away and threw it lightly towards me. The shard fell just besides me.

A shard.

Or perhaps, a piece of meat.

"I haven't tested it, but with one hit from these arms, I could probably completely erase a child the size of a preschooler from the world." Once again, Izumu-kun faced me and spread out his body. "However, when I slaughter, I always use this because it's not painful. Since I destroy the nerves faster than they can transfer information, it doesn't hurt at all. It's close to benevolence, but essentially it's just because I don't want to hear the screams. It's best to have the least amount of suffering. It's the same with your screams and your suffering. That's why when I do it, I don't hold back. Even against a guy like you with no combat abilities, when I do it without any leniency, I use this."

"That's very… kind of you."

Izumu-kun didn't even follow up on my interruption.

Rather, he looked at me with pity.

The overwhelming difference in power between me and Izumu-kun is something easier to understand from Izumu-kun's point of view. It's much easier to see the gap between the top and bottom from the top rather than the bottom. That's why Izumu-kun must not comprehend why I'm doing something so meaningless.

Meaning.

Whether there is one or not, it's the same.

"I'll say it one last time."

"You don't need to say it."

I….

While still standing only halfway up, I pulled out the Jericho from my belt behind my back and pointed the barrel towards Izumu-kun.

"BAAANG."

I pulled the trigger.

The shock reverberated through the side of my body that was kicked earlier.

"…..Ch!"

Izumu-kun jumped to his left. He dodged the bullet. Or rather, by the time I took out the Jericho, he was already taking an evasive action. Even though he shouldn't have noticed that I had a firearm… That's the reason why I attacked with the knife first… Those are quite some reflexes. But that too wasn't unexpected. A human being against who guns don't work on, I have already experienced something like that.

I ran.

Not chasing after Izumu-kun, but towards the sliding door, into the hallway.

"…….Don't fuck with me……."

"…….Don't fuck with me, asshole!"

An angry voice rang out from behind me.

As I thought, he's the impulsive type.

And also the passionate type..

No matter how much composure you show, no matter how calmly you behave, when you're faced with a danger that threatens to hurt you, your mask will come off. Your composure and your calmness are awfully superficial. Your boiling point is lower than the freezing point. Yes, that's Izumu-kun's strength, and therefore his weakness. Especially because he's specialized in strength, he's vulnerable.

And there's one more thing.

In that exchange, Izumu-kun evaded the Jericho's bullet. The fact that he dodged means that if Izumu-kun had been hit by the bullet, even the *Man Eater* would have suffered damage.

He's not invincible.

Neither is he the strongest.

You couldn't even call him the worst.

He's neither a ghost nor a demon.

He's a human.

With a personality.

I went into the hallway and continued to run. I didn't look back. I didn't even need to look back, I knew that Izumu-kun was following me. I could tell by his footsteps that he didn't even try to hide which pressed down with excessive force.

"**Uooooooooooooooooooo**!"

The stairs.

As I turned to climb the stairs, I caught the image of Izumu-kun swinging his right arm down out of the corner of my eye.

--------*Eating One*.

"-------Guh!"

After just barely dodging at the last minute so that it only grazed me, I stepped onto the stairs. Izumu-kun swung his right arm too boldly and lost his balance. That's right, because he always swings it at full force, because it's an inhuman one-hit surekill technique, Izumu-kun didn't bother to consider what sort of position he'd end up in after using it. It may be that Izumu-kun lacks composure, but that's also a weakness.

Okay, not bad.

"……Come here!"

While he was fixing his posture, I rushed up the stairs during that instant. My side began to ache with a feverish pain. It may be bad to move around too much. At worst, my ribs could damage my organs like Izumu-kun said.

But….

I don't care about that.

"Don't try to escape, you lame asshole!"

Izumu-kun yelled at me in the darkness and without any hesitation, placed his feet on the stairs and followed after me. After confirming that, I arrived at the landing of the stairs to the second floor.

"There's no way you can escape in such a narrow space, idiot, stupid, fool! Oh, oh, oh, go on, go on, go on, go on, go on, go on!!"

When I arrived.

I turned back towards Izumu-kun and jumped down.

"-----What?"

Izumu-kun looked surprised.

But it was too late.

It was too late.

I just let gravity take over.

And on this narrow staircase of this laboratory which only allowed for one person to fit through at a time, with the bad footing and the walls and handrails on both sides becoming a hindrance, *Eating One* cannot be used.

A flying body attack.

It wasn't something as clever as that, but with my elbow held up against his face and my opposite shoulder on his throat, I rammed into Izumu-kun. Even if he's a killer or a professional player, even if he says exaggerated things like *Man Eater* or *Carnival*, his body still has the stature of a girl.

Although he tried to resist it.

Izumu-kun bent backwards and lost his footing.

We fell down the stairs and arrived at the hallway. His body became sandwiched between me and the hard wooden floor.

"Guh……"

Izumu-kun let out a moan as if he was sobbing. It was nearly a surprise attack to the body. Even he couldn't have taken zero damage. But this isn't the end of the story. This doesn't count as having defeated the *Man Eater*. That's why I'll use this chance. This is my last chance.

I untangeled myself from Izumu-kun and sat on him. I pointed the Jericho that was in my right hand at Izumu-kun's face.

At this point blank range.

In this position.

No matter how much he struggles, he can't evade it.

"----Y-you… asshole!"

At the last moment, Izumu-kun barely managed to lift his arms and grabbed the Jericho's barrel. And before I could pull the trigger, he shifted the muzzle away from his head. I decided that I couldn't do it with one hand, so I also put my left hand on the grip and tried to reposition the muzzle of the gun by force.

"**Guuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh-----**"

"**Ugghhhhhhhhhhhhhh-----**"

This point blank range.

This position.

However, even with those thin girly arms.

Even with all of my strength, it wouldn't even budge. Rather, little by little, the barrel was being shifted to the side. Where is he getting all this strength from? No, it's not a matter of strength. This doesn't seem to be a simple matter of addition or subtraction. Izumu-kun began to fight back even while being sat on. Even though both his legs should have been firmly locked, Izumu-kun began to shake his torso with force strong enough that it would allow him to get free of this situation with even the slightest inattention.

Inevitably, that created a gap in between my hands that held onto the grip.

Shit, at this rate they won't hold much longer.

This is bad. This is bad. This is bad.

How should I----

"……!"

Whatever.

While still in that position, I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the firing, the sound of the gunpowder exploding… Naturally, since the barrel of the gun was completely off, the direction of the bullet was very far away from Izumu-kun, so it just hit a board in the hallway without piercing anything.

But.

"……Guh?!"

Izumu-kun's strength lessened for a moment.

If you don't stop holding the barrel, you'll receive all of the heat the bullet generates as it passes through. And not only that, if you hear a gunshot near your ear and a bullet passes by it, the sound will be directly transmitted to your brain as vibrations. No matter what kind of training you received, it's not like the structure of the human body will change. There's no way a direct attack on the brain will just go away.

When Izumu-kun's strength lessened, I put all of my strength into pointing the barrel back towards Izumu-kun's forehead. Izumu-kun immediately put his hands back on the barrel, but there wasn't as much strength as earlier. Since I had just fired, the barrel hasn't lost all of its heat.

"-----Fu-fuck…..!"

In an instant.

Izumu-kun completely took his hands off the barrel.

He gave up. There's no way. But in that lying position he can't use *Eating One*… **No… can he use it?** Maybe he can use it just by moving his arms and not his whole body? In reality, Izumu-kun moved his left arm back slightly and stuck it to the floor before swinging it in an arc motion.

Aiming at my face.

Without mercy.

"*Guuh------*"

But if I can dodge it.

If I can dodge his *Eating One*, it'd be set in stone. Once he misses, there'll be a huge opening. The previous blow had already proved

that.

This was the watershed moment.

"**Guoooooo------**"

I bent my back as far as I could and avoided his palm. At least, I tried to avoid it. However, Izumu-kun's *Eating One* was so fast that it completely surpassed my reaction speed-----

The truth is.

If Izumu-kun's posture was normal, I would have eaten it.

I would have been eaten by it.

The gauze on my right cheek was torn off and turned into waste. By a literal paper thin distance, I had escaped from the jaws of *Eating One*.

Alright….

Without time to confirm my success.

"..............Ah**.**"

I found out Izumu-kun's real aim.

The arm continued travelling in a circular arc and hit the floor as Izumu-kun likely intended.

The earlier gunshot stood no chance against that explosive sound.

The floor **was eaten** and scattered into thousands of fragments which flew towards me. Without any regards to my will, my eyelids instinctively closed in order to protect my eyes-----

"Da!"

In the confusion, I forced myself to put more strength on the trigger. The knockback of the bullet came back to me. While feeling the pain of the pieces of wood stabbing my face, I gently opened my eyes to check the results….

".....Gyahaha."

Izumu-kun…..

Didn't have a single scratch on him.

With a single bite of *Eating One*, he smashed through the floor of the hallway and shifted his head, which was supposed to be fixed in place, away from the barrel. Rather than just sending splinters flying, that probably was his main goal. No, the plan was to attain both.

Niounomiya Izumu….

This is bad. He's not an idiot.

"Since you didn't fire continuously, it seems like you're out of bullets… Alright!!" With just his abdominal muscles, Izumu-kun threw me up slightly, and in that moment, he bent both of his legs, passed them above my inseam, and extended them towards my solar plexus. "How long were you sitting in the cowgirl position?! What are you, a pervert with a strong libido, you dumbass!"

I was sent flying through the air with such force that I wondered if my body was suspended from a wire. I got thrown far backwards to about where Izumu-kun and I were imitating the Shinsengumi, around one step below the landing of the stairs. I hit my back against the corner, and after rolling over, I collapsed on the landing.

"....."

I don't have the time to be collapsed.

There was a dull pain in my back and my side. It wasn't my ribs like earlier, but my organs. It felt like my organs were shaken around. Even if they hadn't ruptured, it was still quite painful. There was no feeling of vomiting, so it wasn't my digestive system, it must have been my circulatory system. Then the situation is even more serious. I tried to stand up, but every part of my body was shaking and convulsing.

"Guuuuuh…."

"Gyahaha. You let your first and last chance escape."

Taking a look….

Izumu-kun was standing firmly on both legs in the hallway with a large, deep hole in it. Even though the sound of destruction that hit his ears should have been at a level that a normal human wouldn't be able to stand for a while, let alone think. What kind of semicircular canals does he have? Why didn't he lose his sense of balance with that explosive sound right next to him? Could it be that the structure of his body is actually different? If that's the case, it's ridiculous.

"But let's just say you're pretty good for an amateur."

"....."

He regained his calm and his composure, huh.

Good grief…....

Certainly… I let my chance escape. When Izumu-kun was going on his rampage, that was my one and only chance.

I was out of bullets now.

I was also out of ideas.

It's not like I had any plans in the first place, though.

"……That's enough now, isn't it?"

Izumu-kun said as he lowered both of his arms.

"Since you did your best with me as your opponent, with this *Man Eater* as your opponent, since you fought alone, even Yukariki won't blame you. So tell me the location of *Death Color*."

"……"

"Or is it that you don't know? Was knowing *Death Color*'s location just a lie that you made up?" Izumu-kun wondered. "No… that's not possible. If you did that… I would definitely kill you. If the *Death Colored Crimson* is as strong and as scary as the rumors say, she wouldn't do that."

"……"

Think.

Is there anything?

A means to overcome this worst situation. A way to fix this situation where it's already all over. A way to open this situation that has been completely closed.

If there was something that convenient.

I wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

You can't start life over. You can't, no matter how hard you try. If everything in my life could be done over again, it might have been very happy, but it would be too arrogant and convenient to wish for something like that.

For things like doing something over.

The result will still be the same.

".....To begin with, you're not the type of person to take revenge or avenge someone's death, are you? You have the face of someone who doesn't know joy or sorrow."

"Wha……"

"That's probably why Rizumu took a liking to you. You don't have

any doubts about what you're doing now, do you? You can't calm down, right? You can't calm down at all, can you? Your body is trembling with excitement as if it wasn't your own, isn't it?"

Niounomiya Izumu said in a confident tone.

"I felt it the last two times we talked and when we were fighting just now, you're nothing. I don't feel anything from you. Not even hatred against me or even anger at the fact Yukariki was killed. I can't feel anything. You're not battle-crazed like me, it's like you're not fighting at all. Rather, it's like you're trying to win by running away. I don't understand, I don't understand, I don't understand at all. What the hell are you fighting me for?"

"....."

"You said you wanted to realize something earlier, but what was it that you wanted to realize? I don't get it. I don't feel like killing a weakling like you over such nonsense."

".....Certainly."

Certainly, I had no hatred towards Izumu-kun.

The truth is, I had neither anger nor resentment.

That would be unreasonable.

Izumu-kun was just doing his job. Hime-chan too, was just doing her job. There's no place for sadness and regret, or for anger and hatred.

In the first place.

A person's death is only theirs. When other people put emotion in it and make it become a mess it's just pathetic.

You shouldn't mix grief with anger.

You shouldn't mix grief with hatred.

That's dangerous.

Interminably dangerous.

"......It might be as you say."

"....."

"......If it's like that, I should have just obediently played the role of the narrator in a mystery novel… and left the role of the detective to Kunagisa…."

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's **stupid**!"

I….

Ran.

I climbed further up the stairs to the second floor.

"……Really! I reaaaaally don't get you, fuck! Struggling like that is shameful!! Like a rabbit!"

Shouting, Izumu followed after me with such speed that you'd think he took no damage from my ramming attack and body press. This me who was injured all over wouldn't be able to escape for more than an instant.

But just that little bit was fine.

That little bit was fine, so….

"…..Guh."

I reached the second floor, nearly twisting the ankle that was hit earlier (the pain multiplied and spread exponentially). Without hesitating or stopping, I turned. I had too much momentum, making it impossible for me to get into the first room, so I jumped into the one further back, the hospital room in which I had spent the night with Hime-chan, or rather the one in which a fool had spent the night alone.

I closed the door, slid straight into the bed, grabbed the top sheet which had been neatly made, and threw it spread out in the direction of the door with all my strength…..

The sound of the door opening.

"---------!?"

"……**Uaaaaaaaaaa**!"

I pulled out the knife I had put away again and with a howl, charged towards the spread out sheet, aiming at Izumu-kun who should be at the doorframe beyond the sheet…..

The knife's blade pierced through the sheet.

"……."

But….

There was no response.

The spread sheet closed up.

There was no sign of Izumu-kun on the other side.

Then I saw it.

Izumu-kun was stuck to the ceiling.

With his two legs.

He looked at me and laughed.

Didn't he mention that his leg strength wasn't half bad?

When he opened the door, he leaped towards the ceiling, bypassing the sheet…..

A triangle jump.

"----Gyahahaa!"

Then, after spinning in the air once, Izumu-kun stretched out his left leg and aimed for my heart. I promptly let go of the knife in the sheet and crossed my arms in front of my chest. Immediately after I crossed them, I heard the sound of my bones. Rather than breaking, it sounded more like they were crushed. I was blown away and slammed into the bed behind me.

I lost all sensation in my arms.

The ribs under my arms finally started to hurt. It seems that these were indeed broken. I was just barely able to notice.

"Haaaa… Gugu… kuh."

Even this wasn't Izumu-kun's full strength . That kick just now was only meant to be a threat, and as a means to close the distance between us. And with just that… my arms were crushed.

Yes, to keep me in check….

In check.

Of course, after a jab.

A straight is coming.

"Gyahahahahahahahahahaha! Hya----------hoo!"

With my back on the bed and both of my arms without any strength and spread loosely, I looked upwards, seeing Izumu-kun jump on the bed with his arms bent back in the shape of a bow.

Then.

With those arms.

"Gluttony!!"

Two strikes of *Eating One*.

He swung down.

The two shots were aimed at both sides of my head.

It was that kind of image.

My brain was shaken from both sides and I couldn't think about anything. The shocks didn't neutralize each other but instead synergized, making me feel like my brain cells were being liquified. The bed was completely destroyed at around two points, and as if sinking, as if sinking into a sea of debris, my back reached the floor of the hospital room.

"……Oh, dangerous, dangerous."

And then….

Izumu-kun opened his mouth.

"I instinctively almost aimed at you seriously, even though I shouldn't kill you."

"……."

My head was ringing. The shock waves wouldn't quite leave my body. It felt like every ounce of the water in my body was undulating. Those echoing waves made my damaged bones crack here and there.

"Careful."

Izumu-kun pulled out his arms that were stuck into the floor and took his body off the destroyed bed in an instant. There was no sign of injury on his hands.

It was like it was as usual for him.

"So… was it this one?"

An immense pain ran through my right leg, a pain that I had become all too familiar with. A little later, I heard what sounded like rubber snapping. To be honest, I don't really know which came first, the pain or the sound. Now that my body was hurting all over, it was hard to say that one more added pain had increased my suffering that much.

"For starters, I cut your Achilles tendon… If you want to recover, I

think it'd be for the best that you didn't move," Izumu-kun explained honestly. "Both arms and both legs, with that you're out. So, what will you do?"

"What will I do you ask... Hey, *Man Eater*, do you still need more of a handicap?"

Izumu-kun completely ignored my bold front.

It's no good… I can't struggle anymore.

My strength was now… fixed.

"That's enough, Onii-san. Won't you start talking now? Where should I go to meet the *Death Color Crimson*?"

"....."

"Yes, yes, yes. By the way, how many ribs do humans have in total?" Izumu-kun slowly approached me. "Twelve on each side, that makes a total of twenty four. Gyahaha, that's quite a lot, isn't it? You already had two removed and three broken… 19 remain."

"....."

"How many do you want me to leave?"

Faster than I could respond, Izumu-kun moved his leg. I couldn't defend myself against it with my arms, so I took all of his toes.

"Nguh! Ugh……"

"One." Izumu-kun said. "Next, a second."

He was calm. He was completely calm.

With his legs that were the complete opposite of *Eating One*.

One by one, without any sound, he aimed at my ribs.

"Three, four, five… and a short pause."

"....."

I couldn't even scream or sob anymore. My whole body was in such pain that I didn't understand anything anymore. It was already unclear to me why I was in this situation.

For what exactly?

For who exactly?

How did it get like this?

"Do I continue? Do I stop? You choose."

"....."

"Ah, I'm begging you! That's enough already, isn't it?! Any more of

this and your life really will be in danger! I hate not killing people! This kind of thing isn't my hobby!"

"....."

"......Okay, I'll continue."

Izumu-kun's actions resumed.

Ah……

I wonder what it is.

I'm envious of these kinds of things.

Having a goal, working towards it.

Being able to kill me for a goal.

Being able to kill someone.

Murder.

"In the first place, there's no meaning to this," Izumu-kun said while continuing to act. "No matter how long you keep going, you can't kill me."

".....Can't kill."

"It's not because you can't use your arms and legs, you know? Earlier, when we were tangled at the bottom of those stairs, **you could have killed me**. But you couldn't, you couldn't kill me, that's why. In other words, you don't have the guts to kill me."

"....."

Not being able to kill.

I'm not… able to kill people.

I think killing them is bad.

Killing people is a sin.

Killing people is the worst.

That's why I've been holding back this whole time.

Even though I've thought about killing lots of people.

All my life, I've been holding back.

In reality… it might as well have been like I killed them. Many people died. Most of the people who wanted me dead have ended up dying, and most of the people who didn't want me dead have also ended up dying.

But it's not like I killed them directly.

That was the only theory that supported me.

It was a hope and a principle.

But I think.

If it's not direct, is it not murder?

Is it not murder to kill someone who's about to kill you? Then, if you get killed back when you try to kill someone back, is it not murder? That inverse. That exponential. It's like a Mobius strip going round in circles.

You must not kill people.

That's the absolute taboo.

If you break it, that's no good.

It's surely very, very bad.

That's why as long as you don't break it, it's a solid wall.

If you use a gun, it's much easier to kill people than with a sword. If you use poison, it's much easier to kill people than with a gun. If you use magic, it's probably easier to kill people than with poison. If you use words, it must be much easier to kill people than with magic……

That's how, all this time, I have continued killing.

I have devoured all kinds of people.

I have been preying on all kinds of people.

Cannibalism (eating each other).

I used to think that this word was written as *cannibalism* (eating friends). Even now, half of me still thinks that.

No, actually.

From the bottom of my heart, truly.

At most, that's barking up the wrong tree….

"The Kiyomizu stage at the Kiyomizu Temple."

I said.

"The Kiyomizu stage at the Kiyomizu Temple."

"…….Huh?"

"She's there. Aikawa-san. She'll be waiting for you until the sun rises."

"…….Is that so?"

Izumu-kun pulled his leg back.

I wonder how many ribs I have left.

I was worried about such a thing.

The pain was so mixed up I couldn't tell what was hurting anymore. Won't you just become numb already? Quickly, become numb so that I can't feel anything anymore.

This pain.

This pain.

This pain.

I realize it enough already….

"Well then, I'll get going, but… should I call an ambulance?" Izumu-kun looked at my expression. "You probably can't even use your phone in that shape."

"Please," I answered. "I have a favorite hospital, so contact there……."

"Okay. What's the number?"

I told him the number.

I memorized it before coming here.

Because I thought it would definitely be necessary.

Izumu-kun used his own cell phone to call an ambulance. Even the aftercare is flawless. Professional killers these days provide a thorough service, so it's actually not a bad way to kill or be killed. Ah, but I wonder if Izumu-kun is going to retire from this business. If he's going into seclusion, that's probably his plan. I wonder if that's a waste or not. There's no point in thinking about it.

"It might be something pointless, but… this might not be something I'll get many chances to ask. In the end, you," Izumu-kun said after closing his cell phone. "What the hell did you really want to do? What did you even want to realize to end up in this state?"

"Hmm… I don't know."

"Is that so……" Izumu-kun seemed to have stopped trying to understand. Truly, it was a wise decision. "Then, I'll be going."

"Going where?"

"To that Kiyomizu Temple, of course."

"I don't think you should do that……."

After some hesitation, I decided to warn him. What happens next is none of my business, but I felt it was better to give a warning than not to.

"Aikawa-san is… merciless. Hime-chan was a precious friend to Aikawa-san, so……"

"Precious friend, huh."

"I know that… I truly know. That person probably… she probably killed Zerozaki Hitoshiki. If Rizumu-chan's investigation was correct and Zerozaki Hitoshiki was killed, then the one who killed Zerozaki Hitoshiki was Aikawa Jun," I mumbled. "I know it because I'm his alternative, I know it… That person, I don't know why, but… she has no mercy towards the residents of your world… excluding Hime-chan."

"Is that so. That's exactly what I want."

"……..Why are you so obsessed with Aikawa-san?"

"It's my raison d'etre. Though, that's just what Mr. Fox told me. For me who specializes in *strength*, fighting against the strongest is necessary."

A raison d'etre.

A proof of existence.

For something like that.

For something so ridiculous.

Then, that would be….

The same as me.

"Even though you just got free, you'll head to your death?"

"It's fine. For me, freedom is only something *long-awaited*, so it's not something I'm attached to. And also, if you say that, for me, Rizumu is my precious little sister," Izumu-kun said happily. "Rizumu said she loved you."

"……Well, thanks."

"Nya. She's someone who's quick to fall in love, so don't mind it."

Izumu-kun laughed.

Well, I thought it was useless from the start. There was no way to

stop it. There was already no way to stop the overwhelming battle between Niounomiya Izumu and Aikawa Jun. Aikawa-san surely won't be satisfied without settling things with Izumu-kun who killed Hime-chan. That's already a fated decision accompanied by an almost absolute certainty.

That's the unavoidable Story.

The Story.

I just… squeezed myself in.

Squeezed myself in and forcibly prolonged the Story, that's all.

It was just that.

"....."

I was in an unclear mood.

I couldn't think about anything.

I couldn't hear Izumu-kun's voice very well.

My consciousness... was fading.

Vaguely fading.

".....Izumu-kun, what are you going to do from now on?"

"Hmm, I don't know," Izumu-kun said while imitating my tone. "Just kidding. Well, for starters, I was thinking about starting to take back some of the weakness that I've been forcing on Rizumu this whole time."

"Hmm….."

"Strength is weakness and weakness is strength----that's why. In order to do that, first I have to receive an overwhelming defeat from the *Death Colored Crimson*, that's probably it… to *continue living after having lost*. It's surprisingly difficult."

"Then, Izumu-kun," I said while staring at the ceiling. I no longer had the strength to look at him. "If we have a connection……."

"Please spare me. I don't know about Rizumu, but… someone like you…."

Izumu-kun laughed.

He laughed just like Rizumu-chan.

".....I hate cunning bastards like you."

Then….

Without a sound, Izumu-kun walked out of the hospital room.

I couldn't see him off.

I continued to stare blankly at the ceiling.

Then, I sighed once.

"……..I was hoping to hear that line from you."

As I muttered self-deprecatingly to myself.

The pain finally started to numb.

Even though I had little blood loss, that kick I received at the stairs might be bad. I don't even want to think about what kind of state my body is in right now. Honestly, looking back at my life, this was probably the first time my body has been damaged to this extent.

"Ah…."

Maybe I'll die like this.

Die.

I might die.

At that time, I remembered many things.

Things from way back.

About my sister, about my family, about my friends, about my friends' families. About six years ago, about the five years when I lived in Houston, about the friends I made there, about when I got back to Japan. About Houko-chan, about Moeta kun, about Miiko-san, about Suzunashi-san, about Ukigumo-san, about Koutoumaru, about Nanananami, and about Hime-chan. And about all the other people I've met since I came back to Japan. Some were enemies, some hated me, and some were good friends.

The residents of Wet Crow's Feathers island.

My classmates at the Rokumeikan University.

The girls at the Hanging High School.

The researchers at the Shadou Kyouichirou Research Facility.

And.

Assistant Professor Kigamine and Kuchiha-chan.

It's not like they wanted to die, right?

The truth is, they had been waiting forever.

They waited.

Just that, really just that, they were probably not thinking about anything else. Just for that reason alone, Assistant Professor Kigamine continued to continue, and Kuchiha-chan continued to live.

They were probably prepared even for eternity.

Madly.

To the utmost limit.

So much that it made them want to die.

"……..Well, that's that."

I closed my eyes.

The pain in my body was numbing and dissipating; rather, my eyes were starting to hurt. The ceiling had become hazy and I couldn't see very well. Everything I saw was blurry. Was it because the inside of my head wasn't clear? My eyes were blazing hot. My eyes hurt. My eyes hurt. They didn't take a direct hit, but the ripples of the last two blows must have had a deep-rooted effect on me.

So I closed my eyes.

I'm starting to feel sleepy….

Let's just fall asleep like that.

I don't know if I'm going to wake up tomorrow.

That too will depend on the Story to come.

If I'm not going to die, I won't die, no matter what.

If I'm going to die here, then that would be it.

No matter how much I struggle, it's useless.

After all, it's not like I have anything I want to do.

I have neither hopes nor wishes.

That's why it's fine either way.

Either way, it doesn't matter.

Do as you like.

It's always been like this.

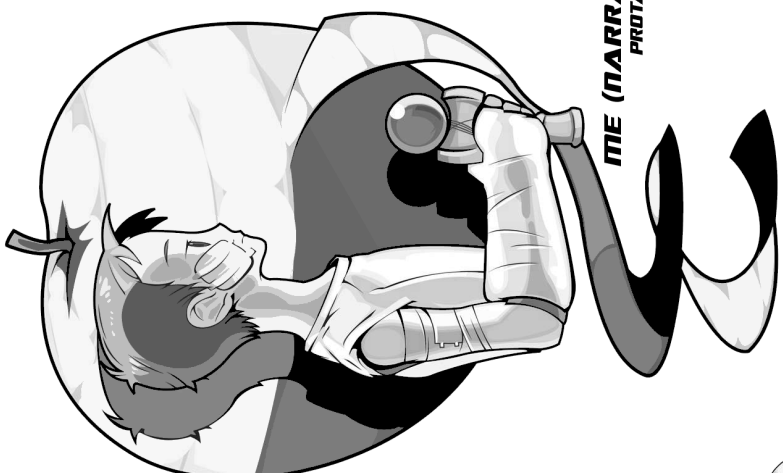
I don't even know if I'm alive or dead.

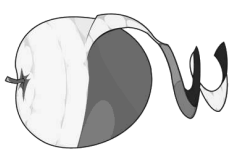
Vague and unclear, half-assed and hazy, not choosing anything and letting myself go along with other people, I've led an uncertain and ambiguous life, that's why….

"….I don't want to die…."

Like that.
I realized that I was alive.

I learned at what moments I cried.





EPILOGUE — MIDSUMMER NIGHT DREAM

Height, 138 cm, weight 32 kg (estimated). Three sizes, after having just begun going through puberty, naturally that's a secret. Bobbed hair and skin so abnormally white that it looked like snow. Only her lips were strangely red. She was like a doll, her appearance looked like a profound taoist beauty. Her blood type was O, Rh minus. Her birthday is the 16th of April, so she is thirteen years old. She lived in Hokkaido until the age of ten, but ran away from home for personal reasons and moved to Kyoto with her half-brother, who is two years older than her. She's a vegetarian who doesn't eat meat. She hates the smell of tobacco smoke more than anything. Her hobby is killing lower life forms. Her favorite spot is Kamogawa Park (obviously, her targets are the ducks and pigeons). As she is a runaway, she doesn't go to middle school, but her intellectual curiosity seems normal for her age, and she goes to the library every day.

That was Yamiguchi Houko's profile.

"Sometimes I wonder if Nonsense User Onii-chan actually lives at the hospital and just comes to visit the apartment once in a while."

Houko-chan said so while peeling an apple with a butterfly knife she handled with a familiar hand. The detached peel fell into a metal bowl that sat on top of her white thighs. Houko-chan was wearing a red dress and sandals with a thin bottom, really making it feel like it was the height of summer. She wasn't wearing any accessories and her fashion was simple overall, but it wasn't because she lacked taste, it's just that Houko-chan has an overprotective brother. However, looking at Houko-chan who was sitting on a steel pipe chair beside the bed, it seemed that the simplicity of her outfit suited her better than if she dressed up in some strange way, and it's not like I don't understand Moeta-kun's feelings.

"Onii-chan, it's no exaggeration to say that you have spent half your life in this hospital room."

"It's an exaggeration. Don't talk about people like they have a frail body."

"Even if you say that, this is the fifth time Nonsense User Onii-chan has went to the hospital since coming to Kyoto."

"It's only five times in six month. That's not that much."

"It’s a lot."

"Is it a lot?"

"That’s frequent."

In the meantime, Houko-chan finished peeling the apple, which was as red as her lips. While I was watching her handle the apple, I learned that the trick to skinning it smoothly was to hold the knife in place and rotate the apple. I thought that she was going to give me that apple, but Houko-chan just started to peel it without moving the knife.

August 22nd.

Originally, this was the day I should have started my part-time job.

I was in a hospital in Kyoto.

Or rather, I was unconscious until yesterday. According to the doctors, I was seriously wandering the boundary between life and death. Today, I finally regained my consciousness, so visits became possible, and the first one to come was Houko-chan.

"So, how long will you be in the hospital this time?"

"Two months until complete recovery… one month until being discharged."

"So you’ll be spending half of your summer vacation in the hospital."

Houko-chan giggled. She’s usually a very honest and nice girl, so why does she sometimes speak in such a strange and cheeky way?

"…….Well, that’s right," I admitted reluctantly. "But it seems there won’t be any lasting effects. The broken bones and the detached bones were just simple fractures. There’s no dietary restrictions either."

"Is that so?"

Houko-chan looked at me on the bed from head to toe, as if licking my body.

"But it’s too funny."

"Don’t say it so clearly……."

"It lacks too much elegance."

"Don’t say it so indirectly……"

Casts on both my arms and legs.

A corset on my torso.

Gauze on my face.

That's how I looked currently.

Needless to say, it was too ugly to imagine.

Still… after having had my body injured to such a degree, to have no lasting effects means that he really is a professional killer with perfect aftercare. Even though he mercilessly broke my bones here and there, my nerves were intact, and my Achilles tendon stuck back perfectly too, so the problem was the damage to the internal organs, but that too wasn't serious enough that an operation had to be done. That didn't change the fact that I had been wandering between life and death, but in this case, that's probably appropriate.

By the way, I had five ribs left.

"I was sleepy last time, so I didn't get to hear the details, but Onii-chan, what exactly happened this month?"

"Ah...." Was it because she was sleepy? "Well, there were lots of things, a lot happened. Did you hear about Hime-chan? Yeah, but with my hospitalization, everything has been solved for the time being…."

"Is that so. Then it's fine."

While talking, Houko-chan continued making progress with the apple. Unlike radishes, apples have a lot of water, so they require more skill to peel, but Houko-chan wasn't even looking at her hands.

".....How is everyone at the apartment doing?"

"As usual. Putting Hime-nee-sama aside, Onii-chan going to the hospital is an ordinary thing, so it doesn't affect our daily lives at all."

"I see……"

"Let's see… I've got one bad news and one good news."

"Let's hear the good news."

"Mii-nee-san got the scroll she wanted."

"Huh?" I asked back without thinking. Right, come to think of it, you could say that was the cause of everything. "....How? Did she find a good job? No, getting such a convenient job that quickly…."

"She won the lottery."

Houko-chan said without any emotion.

"Third prize, 500,000 yen."

"……Really?"

"Really."

"……"

That reminds me, she said something like that.

What a thing. It's optimistic, or she has good luck, or how should I say it, there was no need for me to do anything. No, that's false. It's not like that. In other words… it means that, from the beginning, Miiko-san would have gotten that scroll no matter what happened. No matter how the flow was twisted, no matter what a side character like me did, it all had coherence in the end, and it reached its destination.

That kind of story.

Was that Miiko-san's story?

Certainly……

For that person, that kind of story is appropriate.

"What's wrong? Nonsense User Onii-chan. You look like you have something on your mind."

"No… not really. And the bad news?"

"Yes. Kasugai-san left the apartment last night."

"Yes?" I was a little surprised. "Wasn't she supposed to move to Hime-chan's room? That person."

"Who knows… It seemed useless to try to stop her, and Onii-chan was in a coma so I couldn't inform you, so I let her do what she wanted… Should I have stopped her?"

"No….." I shook my head. "That's the kind of person she is. It's a shame that I wasn't able to say goodbye to her, but there's nothing we can do. She only goes in the direction the wind is blowing."

"I have a message from Kasugai-san."

"Huh."

"'I will never forget the sweetness of the nights we spent together.'"

"……"

In the end, she left while harassing me.

"'The sweetness of the nights,' what does that mean? Did something happen between Kasugai-san and Onii-chan?"

"Umm……."

What are you saying to kids, you parasite.

Don’t ever come again.

"In the end, why did she even come here… for having stayed one month, she didn’t really do anything."

"There’s no need to think that deeply about it. She just simply wanted to play with Onii-chan, didn’t she?"

"If that’s the case, then 'with Onii-chan' is a mistake."

Without paying any mind to my objection, she continued, "Because Onii-chan is popular with abnormal people." It was a hard point to deny, so I just let it slide with a "Maybe, maybe."

"Then that would mean she’s quite cute, Kasugai-san. Disappearing while Onii-chan is in the hospital. In that sense, Hime-nee-sama was probably like that too. Hime-nee-sama’s affection for Onii-chan wasn’t half-hearted."

"Hmm? Ah, no, no, that’s not it. Hime-chan said she had someone else she liked."

".....Is that so."

"What? What’s with that weird pause?"

"No, nothing. Anyway, Nonsense User Onii-chan. So again, there’s one room left open."

"Ah… Hime-chan’s room was originally Ukigumo-san’s room, wasn’t it? Or was it Nanananami’s?"

"If I remember correctly, Ukigumo-san was Hime-nee-sama’s predecessor."

"Is that right… I wonder who’s going to come next."

"It’ll probably stay empty for a while. Moeta and I are going to use it effectively."

After having made the body of the apple quite slim, Houko-chan finally stopped moving her hands. She snapped the knife closed and spun it around before putting it away in her dress pocket. She then picked up the end of the strip of apple that had piled up in the bowl and brought it to her mouth.

…….So you’re going to eat it?

"Well, Nonsense User Onii-chan, leave the apartment to me and use this as an opportunity to slowly heal." Houko-chan smiled creepily while eating the smooth apple(’s peel). "I’ll visit you again when I’m

free."

"Please do……"

"By the way, Nonsense User Onii-chan. I heard it from Mii-nee-san, but… that hair, you had Hime-nee-sama cut it for you?"

"Hmm? Yeah. Sorry about cutting it without telling you."

"It's not something that can be resolved with just an apology."

"……"

She didn't forgive me.

No mercy, huh.

"It's fine. It'll quickly grow back anyway… Next time, I'll ask Houko-chan. My hair grows fast. It always has. When I was about your age, it had grown to my waist. I had it in a thick braid."

"Is that so?"

She didn't seem interested.

It seems she didn't like men who talk about their past.

"Thanks for the food."

Having eaten the apple in the bowl down to the skin, Houko-chan stood up from her chair.

"Then, Nonsense User Onii-chan, I plan to stop by the library on my way back, so I should be going now."

"Okay. Be careful on the way home."

"I'll come visit you again tomorrow or the day after. At that time, do you want me to bring the books you like… Ah."

"That's right," she said. Houko-chan took off the knapsack she was carrying and placed it on the chair. She then searched inside and took out a reasonably sized paper bag.

"Here. It seems it's a present from Witch Onee-san to Nonsense User Onii-chan. I completely forgot I had it."

"Hmm……?"

That doesn't sound like Nanananami.

Tilting my head, I opened the paper bag, wondering if it was some kind of trap. What was inside was a machine that I've never seen before. A black body. But it wasn't made of a strong material, it seemed kind of cheap. It had a screen and buttons on both sides. Hmm, judging from the size and how it looks, it's probably a portable

game console or something like that, but there was no place to put a cartridge in. No, looking closely, there was a slit above the screen that looked like a card reader. Does it read the information from the card here?

"What's this? It's not an Advance… is it?"

"It's a Barcode Battler. It seems to be the most hip and popular item among kids right now. Let's see, that console is the second version."

"Barcode……?"

"To put it simply, it's a device that lets you scan barcodes in that slit, convert the barcode numbers into combat abilities, and then play against each other."

"Hmm. Strange things are in fashion these days… I didn't know about it."

"I also didn't know. But you know, Witch Onee-san is sensitive to these trends."

"That's true. I don't like praising her, but I must at least admit that." I took a good look at the frame. "But the fact there are fights means that it's a game for two people, right? It seems to have that style, so I can't play it in a private room. And I can't really play with the doctors."

"She said you can also play by yourself. Here, I have the game manual." Houko-chan took out another bundle of paper. It was handwritten, so it must not be the original manual. It seemed to be Nanananami's own creation (that freak). "It's apparently a big boom that's turning over the world, so it's quite a hard toy to get. She said that you needed to thank her."

"She really doesn't change… Even if the world was destroyed, regardless of how the Story turned out, she really would just say, 'As if I cared about that.' It really, really, really goes without saying that I don't want to become like that, but I can't hide my respect."

But, well, it's certainly not bad material for killing time. I was thinking of passing this month by just reading books, but playing with this for a bit might not be bad. I can't say anything until I've read the manual to understand what kind of game it is, though.

……It won't explode or anything, right?

"Onee-san also prepared another console called the Virtual Boy, but apparently, 'It's too new for Inosuke so he probably won't be able to use it.'"

"Hmm. She really makes it sound like I'm behind on trends."

"Then, I'll go now."

Houko-chan said, and just as she was putting her knapsack on her back again...

"Yoo-hoo!"

The sliding door facing my bed in the hospital room opened with incredible force and a nurse carrying a tray of food entered in like a skilled waitress.

"Ii~, it's been a long time, it's time to eat!"

"....." "....."

"It's Ii~'s favorite, hospital food!"

"....." "....."

No, I definitely don't eat hospital food because I like it.

I mean, even you are gonna reappear?

I didn't expect that.

The nurse, who was wearing a short skirt and white stockings in clear violation of the dress code, approached the bed and put the tray down on the table in a fluid motion. She's someone that's foolish on both the outside and the inside, but at least she does her job efficiently. As one would expect from someone wearing glasses (irrelevant).

"No… but you know, it's really been a while. It's been nearly two whole months since Ii~ has been to the hospital, so Onee-san was worried!"

".....That's....."

Thanks for that, really.

I didn't realize you were worried about me not coming to the hospital.

"Hmm? Oh dear, oh dear. Ii~ mustn't be underestimated, nya. That..." The nurse looked sharply at Houko-chan, who had frozen because of the sudden intruder (more precisely, Houko-chan had one

hand in the pocket of her dress and entered into combat preparation). "That's quite a cute girl that came to visit you! Uwa, really cute! What is this girl?! Ii~, that's not fair! With that loli girl! In this room with only one bed! What have you two been doing all alone in this locked room?! Ah, really, you Humbert Humbert!"

"Who are you?"

Do I really have to deal with this high tension pervert during my hospitalization?

I reached towards the bowl of food with my arms which were difficult to move because of the cast. The situation with my legs is quite delicate, so I can't move them carelessly, but the fractures in my arms are around my ulnae, so as long as I restrain myself, they shouldn't impact my daily life.

"Kyaa, really pretty! Truly lyrical! What's your name, little miss? Tell it to Onee-san, please!"

"Yamiguchi Houko," Houko-chan said and slightly bowed her head. She took her hand away from her pocket, so it seems her caution had lessened. "Thank you for the compliment."

"Nya? Yamiguchi?" The nurse tilted her head. "……Nyan. How should I put it, it's unique… or rather, it's a strange name. Are you sure it's not Sekiguchi? Well, you're cute, so I forgive you. Moe! Hey, hey, Houko-chan, what's your relationship with this unfriendly big brother?"

"Sex friend."

I spit out the miso soup I was about to drink.

Even the nurse had frozen.

Time in that hospital room had frozen.

Well, wait… calm down, become calm. This phenomenon… it may be an attack from an enemy stand!

"Is something the matter?"

Houko-chan tilted her head in wonder.

"……Houko-chan… forgive this weakling and coward for answering a question with another question, but in which dungeon did you acquire such vocabulary?"

"Witch Onee-san told me. If someone asked me about my

relationship with Onii-chan, that's what I should answer."

"....."

As I thought, it was that witch….

I'll need to settle this with her someday.

"Is it bad?"

"Yeah… very much." I shook my head powerlessly. "Even I technically have something called a life, you see."

"Ah, but don't worry," Houko-chan laughed. "I've only said that to about ten people."

My life…….

My life… where is it going?

".....Houko-chan. I'm going to say this for your sake, but I don't think you should use words that you don't know."

"Okay. But then, what should I say when I receive such a question from now on?"

"Well obviously, since we haven't done anything strange, you can just answer normally and say 'we're friends.'"

"We did it."

"Wh-what!?"

Th-that's impossible.

I shouldn't have yet done anything unethical or perverse with Houko-chan. Because I'm the type to save the dessert until the end… Wait, that's not it.

Houko-chan smiled mischievously at me.

"As expected of Witch Onee-san. The plan of getting Onii-chan to call me a friend worked perfectly. I'm really happy."

"....."

"Well then. If there's anything I can do for you, please feel free to call me at any time."

Saying that, she passed by me and the nurse (who was still frozen in place) and headed for the door. When she slid the door to the side, she around and,

"Ah, and also."

She said.

"I at least know what sex means. I may have no experience, but

I'm still a girl."

"....."

"Then, good health, friendship, and reunion."

Houko-chan went out into the hallway and the door automatically slid shut. The hospital room went back to being plunged in silence, but eventually the nurse picked up her cap which had fallen off and fixed the position of her glasses, then after shrugging,

"She got me."

She twisted her lips and looked at me.

"She's really cute, that girl."

".....Well, yes."

"It looks like she's going to die around next month."

"What are you talking about?"

It was a severely serious topic.

The nurse sat down on the chair where Houko-chan was sitting with a "Heave-ho."

"It's been a long time, but Ii~… Did you become more manly?"

"......Is that sarcasm because half of my face is covered in gauze?"

"No, it's not that. Your demeanour became more manly."

"Let me see… yes," I answered a bit jokingly. "Well, I overcame the death of a comrade and grew as a person, I guess."

"Huh."

She didn't seem to care.

It seems she just wanted to say it.

"....."

"Hmm? What's up? What's with that silence?"

".....Nothing."

"Is it a mating signal?"

"No."

Hmm.

Well, that's right.

It's embarrassing and bothersome, but I have no choice.

It's something like a ritual.

Even something trivial seems valuable.

"Miss nurse, are you fine with the usual quiz?"

"Hmm? Yeah, it's fine. What is it?"

She had a curious look on her face.

Right, it's better to let someone else do the stuff you don't want to do.

"The time is a night long ago, the place is somewhere not here, for reasons, five people gathered there…."

I briefly explained this case's circumstances to the nurse. The straitjacket under the manteau, the double personality of the professional killer and the great detective, the siblings who were one as a pair and a pair as one. The bodyguard string technique user. The girl who won't die and the continuing assistant professor. And an incompetent user of nonsense. When he woke up in the morning, four of them were dead… and only one survived.

Haplessly, he survived.

He lived.

".....Hmm. This time's quiz isn't a locked room. Aaaaah, boring."

"Is it boring?"

"Yes. Because recently, I've become a locked room enthusiast."

"Haa……."

"They call me the woman who remembers the number of locked rooms she's read about. Well, it's fine, um." The nurse held her head a moment. This time, she seemed to be a bit troubled. "So, this pathetic and uncool idiot who survived, he's not the killer, right?"

".....Yes."

I didn't use such horrible terms.

"Hmm. Hmmm. No outsiders?"

"None."

"Then there's only one answer," The nurse said matter-of-factly. "It wasn't a double personality, but twins, right?"

"……..Correct."

"If they're twins, then essentially, they possess *the same body*, so it's simple to act as someone with a double personality, isn't it? To the extent that if they're skilled, it won't be seen through at first. Imagine two people with the same body, whether they do detective work or killing, there's nothing more handy than that. It's impossible to put on

a straitjacket and manteau alone, but when there are two of you, you can put them on and off as you please. That also means there's no problem with driving the motorcycle. And also, that string technique user, even if she's a strong girl, even if you can't win against her in a one on one, with a two on one the odds become better."

"Yes… that's right."

That's the Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic.

Niounomiya siblings.

Rizumu the *Carnival* and Izumu the *Man Eater*.

The naming is also a trick.

Identical twins of different sexes are impossible, so if they appear with the same body, you'll end up believing their words. Even Izumu-kun… even though he said *big brother*, his body is still the same as Rizumu-chan's, it doesn't change the fact that it's the body of a little girl.

The double personality was a fabricated fake.

I had never imagined something like making it seem that two people were in fact a double personality, but simply thinking about it, there are many other advantages to it beside what the nurse just said. First is the body double. If Rizumu-chan is at the front, then Izumu-kun will be at the *back* and he can sneak around freely. And… not just that. If Rizumu-chan was only in charge of the *weakness*, that inevitably leaves a bad taste.

Izumu-kun described Rizumu-chan as a puppet.

Puppet (alternative).

Substitute (alternative).

Body double (alternative).

"Aside from the double personality being twins, I think the rest of it is pretty much the same as what Iuzmu explained." That's what Aikawa-san said during the discussion. "And… like that *Fragment* Ichihime talked about, Izumu can probably remotely control Rizumu to some extent. That would explain what happened when you passed Rizumu by the stairs that night."

Right….

A byproduct of *Frament*, she said.

The empty Rizumu-chan.

The hollow Rizumu-chan.

Puppet.

Autonomous radio control.

That was… not a metaphor, not pedantry, not self-effacement, its meaning was exactly as it was. The personality given to her body was severely and arbitrarily lacking. And it was at the will of Izumu-kun.

He could control it.

Like that night.

Like a puppet.

A puppet given a transient personality.

She was programmed with the bare minimum personality that was so hopelessly lacking she didn't question her consciousness vanishing or the fact that she was wearing that kind of clothing under her manteau.

Even Hosuke Sharaku wasn't like that.

Niounomiya Izumu as an absolute professional killer that eliminated *weakness* in every sense of the word and specialized only in *strength*, and Niounomiya Rizumu as the spare. Nioinomiya Rizumu was the caretaker of the spare body. The reason why Izumu-kun sympathized so much with Rizumu-chan had become clear to me.

"But… one of the two died in that fight."

"That would be it. But the math works out. The truth is that there were six people and two of them survived, so that uncool and pathetic idiot doesn't have to be the culprit. Naturally, the body in the adjacent hospital room was the spare little sister."

The beheaded corpse of Rizumu-chan. That was the work of Hime-chan's *string techniques*. The one who pierced a hole in her chest and **took her heart** was probably Izumu-kun, though.

Heart.

Rizumu-chan's heart.

The proof of being alive.

"....."

The fact that the two of them were considered to be a double personality is certainly something that the *Strategist*, Hagihara Shiogi,

would be able to easily see through without any trouble, that's why it was a prerequisite that Shiogi-chan and the Niounomiya siblings didn't fight directly. The fact that she knew about the Nionomiya siblings without having met them directly was the deciding factor. However, in this exceptional case, that kind of trick would be difficult to see through for most people, including me, unless if it were accidentally used in a way that greatly deviated from its intended use.

It's simple and therefore difficult to solve.

It's not logic.

What you need is a leap of logic.

A spur of the moment idea.

It's not even a process of elimination.

"....."

But that doesn't mean that the trick the Niounomiya siblings played was an excellent one.

Rather, it's the opposite.

Ephemeral.

It was hopelessly ephemeral.

Really, well said.

I'm a professional killer contracted by order

With fourteen holy crosses at my side, I begin executing my errand.

The Massacre Magic Group, the Niounomiya Troupe……...

What exactly do they think of humans?

"Well, in the first place, multiple personalities aren't that recognized in medicine. That professional killer thinks his partner died. Now, if I leave this corpse and run away somewhere, I'll be free! Since he normally passes for someone with a double personality, only a few would know the truth of his existence, probably only his relatives. In the eyes of the world, he's dead, so he can enter into a life of seclusion. Even if that meant leaving behind his sister's corpse…."

"The *heart* is always near, huh?"

The truth is probably not that romantic. Izumu-kun wasn't the kind of person who liked such fantasies. If I told him that, he'd probably just laugh in my face. If it was only that, it'd be fine, but knowing Izumu-kun, he might get angry.

But… not everything was calculated.

Izumu-kun lost his sister.

Even if she was just a replacement for the system, I know that she wasn't just a mere replacement for Izumu-kun because of the fact that he called out to me in that courtyard, even though he was risking the collapse of the system itself.

I'm sure at that time, Izumu-kun was...

Bored.

Of killing.

And probably of living.

Yeah… that's right.

Maybe that act was just a spur of the moment thought for Izumu-kun. It may have been the kind of fleeting, fragile, wandering thing that you didn't think of until a second before and ended up forgetting the second after.

Everything.

In the end, when you get to the bottom of it, that's how it is.

"Something like that. The quiz is critically lacking in information, so it's impossible to get into the details, but it can't be helped.. How's that for the time being?"

"Yes… as expected of you."

"Ehehe."

Ta-dah, the nurse stuck out her chest.

I ended up putting her in a good mood, huh?

"Ah, sorry, I have work, work. Ii~, is that all?"

"Eh, well, yes. I don't have much of an appetite."

"I see. Then I'll clean that up." The nurse promptly put the bowl back on the tray. "Well then, best regards for the coming month, Ii~."

"....."

One month.

That's a chilling thought.

In a situation where I can barely move, having this pervert hold the power over my life and death……..

"……Um, miss nurse (in training)."

"Hey, I'm a nurse (registered). I'll sue you for sexual harassment."

"Could you tell me your name? For some reason… I think we're going to have a long relationship."

"Hmm? You don't know? I think I told you my name when we first met."

"I might have heard it, but I forgot."

"What a bad memory you have."

The nurse crossed her arms as if she was fed up.

"Well, it's fine. My name is Katanashi Rabumi."

"Katanashi… Rabu?"

"Rabumi. Hihi, it's a girly name, isn't it?"

"No… Yes, it is."

I mean, it's not a human name.

I can't think it's the name of someone who will stay a side character.

"…….What were your parents doing?"

"Eh? Hey, hey, that's shameless. If you want to know more details about me, you'll have to enter the hospital route and advance on to the Rabumi scenario."

"There's no such thing."

"Kamaitachi no Yoru?"

"Shut up, you idiot!"

"Nyahaha! Well then."

After the nurse put her hands on her hips and struck a pose like a hero of justice, she slid the door and left the hospital room.

…….

Sometimes I wonder if there are only crazy people in this world.

Everyone is crazy.

Ill, broken.

Probably from the structure itself.

"I'll just have to give up and think it's that kind of story… It's a cruelly unreasonable story."

Taking Miiko-san's example, it may just be that you reap what you sow, and that it's just karma.

Because I'm crazy, everyone around me is crazy. Because I'm the worst, everyone around me is the worst. How can a compass with the wrong coordinates draw a correct map?

Ah, that's right.

Miiko-san.

What should I do about Miiko-san?

At this rate, I won't be able to go back to the apartment for awhile… it's a bit of a shameful story. If she came to visit me, what kind of face should I meet her with?

An unsightly figure.

An unsightly result.

Shameful.

Really, there's a limit to how shameful one can be.

"Izumu-kun… I wonder what happened to him."

Three days have passed since then.

Death Colored Crimson VS. Man Eater.

The result of that had already come out long ago.

He said he was tired of killing.

Being raised as a killer… is that really possible for a personality created to be a killer? Can a weapon created only to kill, only to massacre, have a change of heart?

……...I'm sure it's possible.

There are some who get tired of living.

There are some who get tired of themselves.

There are some who forget that they're living.

There are some who want to forget that they're living.

There were also some who didn't know.

Hime-chan… what about her?

Was I able to remember correctly?

My meeting with Hime-chan.

I met Hime-chan.

I think there was only that meaning. Without an alternative, I think there was only that meaning. But even if that was the case for me, what about Hime-chan? For Hime-chan, did meeting me have any meaning? Did something change for Hime-chan as a result of meeting me? Did the fact that she met me and no one other than me have a meaning for her?

Hime-chan cried many times in front of me.

I hurt Hime-chan many times.

Unconsciously, but sometimes intentionally.

Was I able to give her something for that?

Was I able to do something in return?

I don't know, but.

"……..Surprisingly, it's something that I don't know myself."

Hime-chan's words.

I see, what an odd thing to say.

It's truly… exquisite

Then maybe I won't know for the rest of my life.

Only on this issue, there's no dependable contractor who will appear dashingly at the very end and give the answer to everything. It's my problem, my question, and my own opponent, so it's best to answer it myself.

But I'm sure.

Since that June… Hime-chan was alive.

If that's the case, my existence wasn't in vain.

My meeting with Hime-chan wasn't in vain.

There was salvation.

As Izumu-kun said, she, Yukariki Ichihime, may have killed too many to live… That might also be reaping what you sow, karma….

Even so.

Even so, Yukariki Ichihime was still living.

Her own story.

"……Her own, her own and only her own story, huh."

Story.

Suddenly, those words.

I remembered the words of the fox-masked man.

In this case, he was wandering around on the outer frame from before it started to until after it ended, but in the end, he didn't step into the center of the Story. While having a deep connection with Assistant Professor Kigamine, Kuchiha-chan, Rizumu-chan, and Izumu-kun, the fox-masked man didn't have anything to do with the actual incident. Unlike me, he was satisfied with being an observer from start to finish. Being the cause of the cause, and directing the stage of the stage…….

He was satisfied with just knowing the truth.

Even those two *Cannibals*... he only thought of them as effective and replaceable proxies. Even the undying girl was regarded by him as merely a passing point.

"Aikawa-san's, huh……"

As far-fetched as it sounds, it's not unthinkable. Rather, it makes a lot of sense if you think about it. The similarity between the two that made you feel the distortion, and also the differences between the two that made you feel the distortion.

But I haven't told Aikawa-san about it yet. Even when we met at the Kyoto Imperial Palace, I didn't dare mention the circumstances around him. The existence of the fox-masked man was completely erased in front of Aikawa-san. It's not like I was putting on airs, it's not like I was feeling guilty from touching upon Aikawa-san's past without her consent. But still, I didn't say a word to Aikawa-san about the fox-masked man's existence or that I knew him.

I felt more disgusted at myself than guilty for doing that.

But I just couldn't bring myself to say it.

It's not that I didn't say it, I couldn't say it.

I was… just scared.

The fox-masked man.

I was just scared of that man.

That abnormal, no matter what faces he had…..

I didn't want to get involved.

My enemy.

Now that he has declared that, I wonder if that fox-masked man has something laid out for me. If that's the case, should I accept his challenge? It's too much, it's too ridiculous. Even if he said that it's the Story's plot, I really just can't accept it.

With a fear like death.

With that Worst.

I wonder how we should face each other……

"……..I wonder what's going to happen from now on……"

Nothing has changed.

No one has changed.

I haven't changed.

Not being involved with anyone or anything.

I was hoping that time would just pass lazily.

But that's impossible.

Living is a series of changes and transformations.

A series of ramifications and complications converging towards death.

I haven't lived long enough to get tired of living.

Rather, I was tired of dying.

The Story doesn't matter too much.

But since that's all there is to it….

We are alive.

Bye bye.

Farewell.

Goodnight.

Thank you.

"Do not eat, need we say more?" is the END.

AFTERWORD

"Huh, maybe if I continue to live, I'll die?" I think that every person has been confronted with this question, but when I had bumped into it as a relatively young book author, "Absurd, absurd, there's no way people die!" I had closed the question with that stupid conclusion. And, it's obvious, but humans can die. They will die for sure one day. It feels like "What are you saying?" but it seems it's something that's already decided. It's not even decent. It's not a joke. Even if the person in charge came out, that person in charge will eventually die. No matter how much you stretch out your life expectancy or how much you lower the probability of death, day by day, living through a day in itself is apparently like augmenting the possibility of dying. So, if there was a box where inside there were winning lottery tickets, and the ratio between winning and losing was about forty thousand to one so that even if you drew one ticket each day you'd still end up losing, even then the fact that, day by day, people are living with unreliable and unfounded ways to win like "The tickets on that side seem to be the winning ones." or "The ones on the top aren't mixed, so they're dangerous." and mere consolations like "Normally you don't draw that kind of thing." is something sad. When you die you'll die, even if you get hit by a meteorite. Lottery is a gamble, but if the chances to win are low enough, then it's no longer gambling, or something like that.

Further talk would just be sloppy and have no correlation with the characters appearing in this book, but the key person of the book, Madoka Kuchiha, is an immortal girl. Even though there was a first person narrator, since it's something that's also written elsewhere, it's true with a 99 percent certainty. But if the meanings of the established words "life" and "death" aren't steady, then I'm worried, even though it's other people's affairs. Well, if you were to say that the Niounomiya siblings were just an entity that divided the *strength* and *weakness* that was originally one into two, to begin with, they were just bridges that failed to lead the narrator that is the nonsense using protagonist to his death, and they weren't even living properly. It seems like only

characters whose problems weren't things like living or dying had appeared. It's not like the book isn't wobbling, really I don't know what karma led to things ending up like this, but like that the final boss appeared, it was *Cannibal Magical: The Niounomiya siblings of Massacre Magic*.

Now, as for editor in charge Ooda Katsushi-sama and illustrator in charge Take-san, I would like to do the usual acknowledgments, but I'm beginning to run out of variations of how to thank them. I no longer know what to say, but even if I run out of words to thank them with, my feeling of gratitude won't run out. So that the love for my readers doesn't run out, this unworthy me will continue to write decent texts. Well then, if we have a connection, I would like to see you again.

Nisio Isin

Notes

[←1]

The 1979 one

[←2]

In Japanese legends, a human who ate mermaid flesh is called Yao Bikuni and is said to be able to live up to 800 years.

[←3]

Resisting is pronounced tatetsuku which phonetically means "shield piercing."

[←4]

Pronounced as wet, written as extinct.

[←5]

Pronounced as dry, written as blood loss.

[←6]

The Ten Uji Chapters refer to the last ten chapters of the Tale of Genji. The chapter named Sawarabi is the 48th one.